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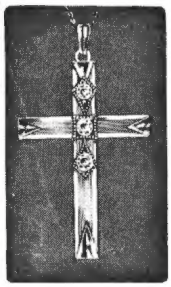

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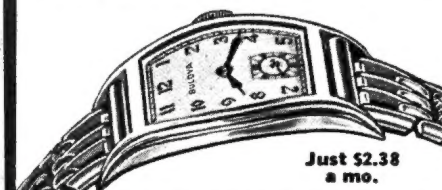

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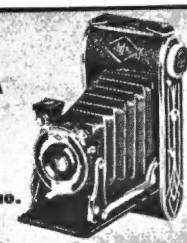

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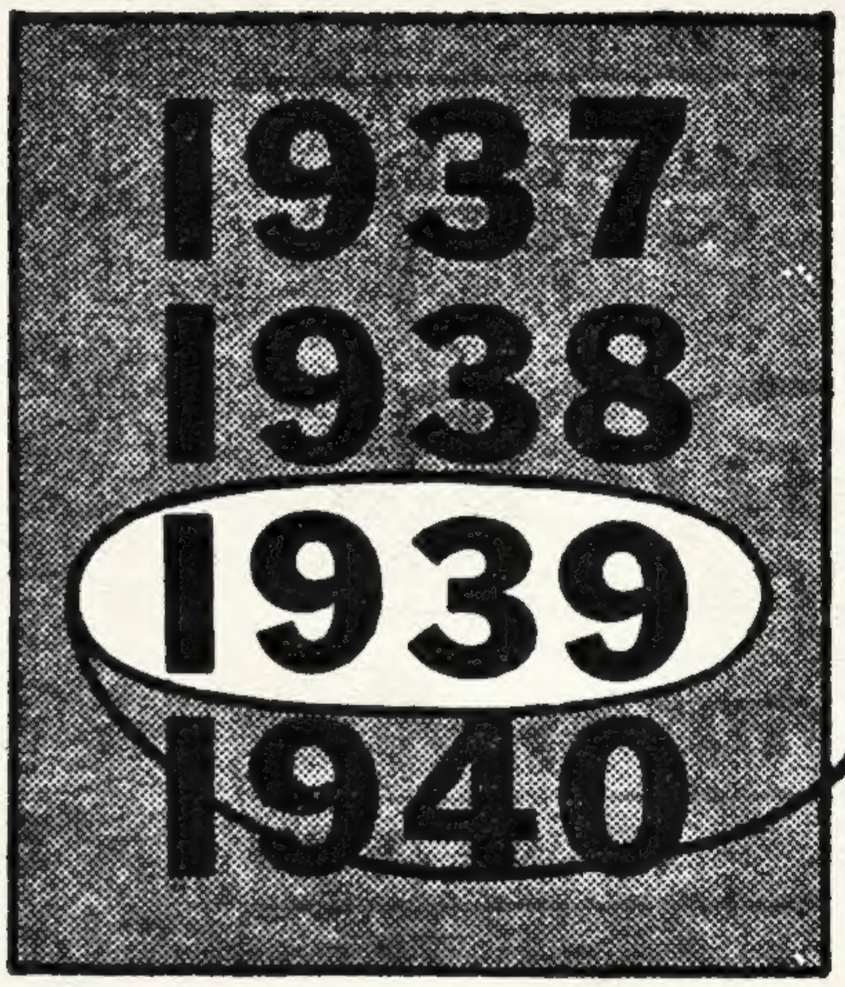

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With one of his partners in boothill and the other doomed to hang for his murder, young Danny Walsh had to stick it out on that ghostly, bushwhack range. . . . For, living or dead, to Danny a partner was a friend to fight for!

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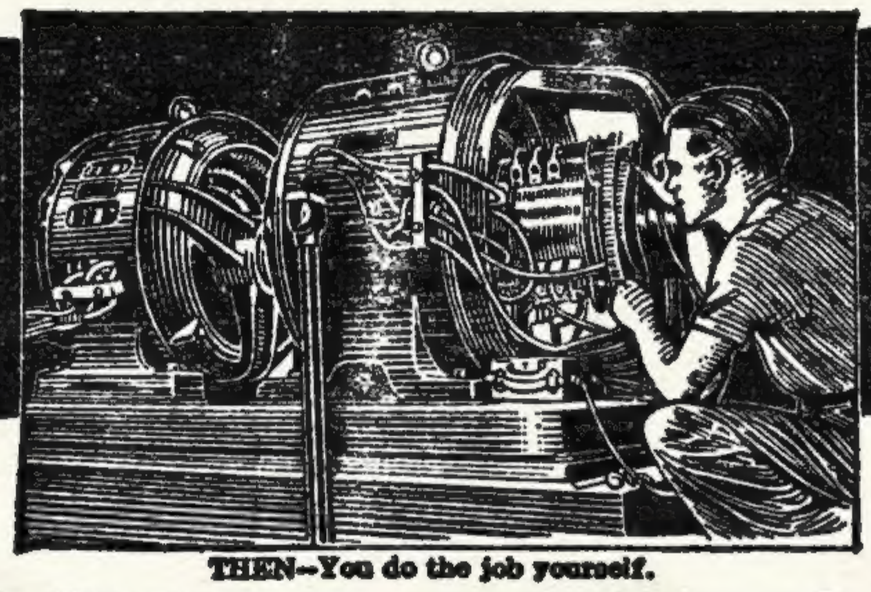

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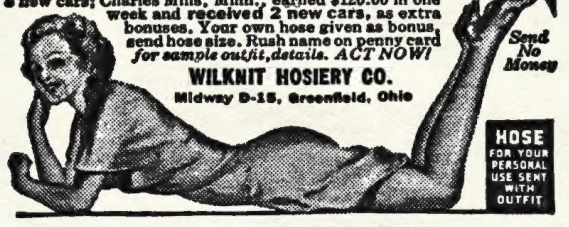

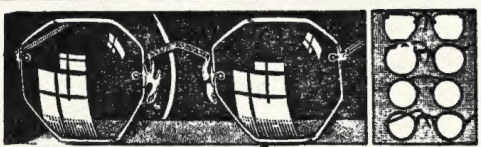

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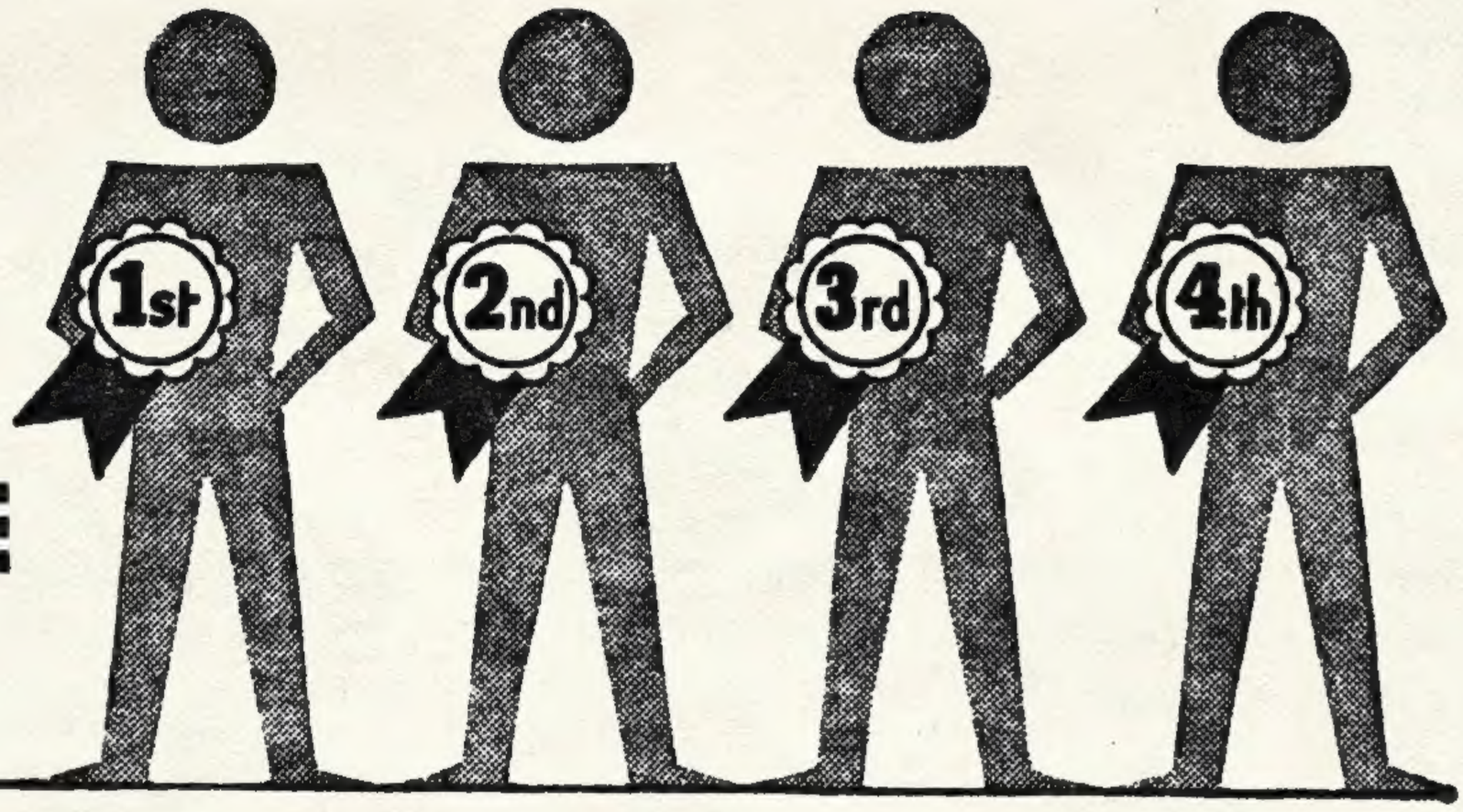

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LONG-EAKINS Company
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armed with lances, strung bows and needle-guns. The ground, the scrub growth, every sandy gully apparently had sprouted warriors!

There was, Forsyth saw, just one thing to do—leave the mainland and make their way to the questionable protection of the island.

Infuriated at seeing their error in not at once having occupied the island, the Indians split their forces and some crossed below it, pouring in a disastrous fire from two sides, while others took up positions up and down the stream, enfilading it.

Lying on their bellies, firing revolvers and carbines, the scouts scooped rude earthworks with knives and pannikens, which afforded some protection. At risk of their lives, some of the men crawled out and dragged dead horses before the pits.

That night the men, hungry and thirsty, dug an angular trench so that they might communicate and eke out their slender water supply without undue danger. And next morning they were treated to what many of them believed would be their last sight on earth.

Chief Roman Nose, a magnificent bronzed figure, naked except for a breech-clout and his war-bonnet of eagle feathers, stood in full view, marshalling his warriors for the final charge. A war cry sounded the signal for this rush, and each man lay low in his pit. Arrows and bullets swept over the entrenched scouts, but no return fire was made until the Indian horde was almost at the edge of the island. Then the pits belched forth a jagged eruption of fire. Yet the Indians came on, chanting their shrill battle cry. Three more volleys snarled from the white men's repeaters, opening gaps in the Indians' lines, and then, at a sixth concerted firing, the Indians wavered and broke.

That night, caring for the wounded, repairing the little well which was their sole water supply, and cutting steaks from

the dead horses occupied the survivors. They had but one hope, a tragic one at that. Fort Wallace was almost a hundred miles distant. Somehow they must get a messenger through to the post commandant for aid.

Of the many volunteers, two were chosen to run the gantlet of Indians. Next day the fighting was continued, but by this time the troop had managed to dig in a little deeper, and less damage was done, though the wounded suffered greatly from lack of medical attention, and the others from hunger, since their only source of food—the bodies of the horses—had gone bad. That night two other scouts were sent out, and after another day of purgatory, two more were sent.

Yet another day and some hours were to go by, during which both the wounded and the sound men were to suffer the tortures of the damned, as they waited for another charge, which this time, they knew, would be the end.

But on the ninth day, a man, half mad with hunger and the torture of his wound, leaped up and shouted. In the distance came the dust of a column of cavalry, the glint of sunlight on sabres and rifle barrels.

The Indians had sighted it, too. They withdrew swiftly, and the little party, less than half of the original company, after standing off almost twenty times their own number for nine days, were rescued.

Characteristic of the Western pioneers was their dauntless courage and perseverence against odds which would have overwhelmed a lesser breed. Small wonder, then, that they built from the wilderness a new and rich empire, asking neither favors nor odds from the hand that Fate dealt them.

—THE EDITORS.

SICKNESS OR ACCIDENT

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TRAIL OF THE BOOM-CAMP FUGITIVES

THEY were almost finished, and each of the three men, staggering on through the blinding lash of mountain blizzard, falling and then fighting their way painfully forward, knew it. Behind them lay the gold camp of Seven Mile, and the three hempen nooses which they had left empty and swinging, the night before. Ahead lay white, freezing death in the steadily rising drifts—unless they could make it to Alder Bar.

Fancy, the slender little tinhorn, fell once more and could not rise. Big Sam, suspected sluice robber, ripped off his sheepskin, and after half an hour's numbing work, managed to twist off some frozen saplings to make a crude stretcher.

"Can't be so far now," Sam called to Yuba as they slogged on with the unconscious man. He didn't want to think, even if they did reach the other camp, of what their welcome might be. At least this storm would stop word going out from Seven Mile that they were sought by the Vigilantes. . . . Then Yuba, who had needed hanging, Seven Milers had said, "just for general orneriness," staggered and sank slowly into a soft, white drift. Sam cursed, but his own body wouldn't obey his will. He stumbled down. . . .

By no stretch of the imagination could the snowed-in gold camp of Alder Bar be mistaken for heaven, but Big Sam thought, as he came to consciousness in a cabin there, that it was as near to paradise as he'd ever want to come. The blackened, frost-bitten faces of his partners were swathed in grease and bandages; already a crude surgical operation had been performed on Yuba's leg; strapped to a board it had been sawed off at the knee. Big Sam's own left hand was useless and stiff, lacking two fingers. Little Fancy's cough wracked the gambler's thin frame ceaselessly.

From the men who took turns nursing them, Big Sam found that they had been rescued by a hunting party who had been out after meat for the camp. Sam tried to stifle his sigh of relief when he learned that the snow would cut off Alder Bar from the outside world for the next four months, at least.

Yet there was always the haunting dread that someone at Alder Bar might recognize them from their dark and twisted path that stretched for years behind their coming to Seven Mile. What difference now if they had solemnly sworn to lead decent, honest lives, once they escaped the Vigilante noose? No; their debt was already marked in red along the frozen gold frontier, and not all the promises of a changed future could balance it. They had until the chinook winds melted the snows; then, as always, they must leave, stealthily and by night, hunted through the lonely trails.

Meanwhile they must live. And they must take care of Fancy, whose flushed, feverish face told only too plainly the dread story of his illness. So Yuba, on his home-made peg leg, and Sam started out. They found, at last, work of a sort at the one mine which was keeping open that winter, about three miles from town. And every other day they came in to nurse and bring cheer to their sick partner.

But the fever would not leave the little gambler. His over-bright eyes never seemed to close in rest.

One evening, he said, "Listen, fellers: There ain't any sense in you sticking here an' risking your lives. The big thaw's due to strike almost any time, and someone from Seven Mile's sure to show up. I ain't goin' to have you riskin' your lives for mine."

Big Sam snorted. "I never yet quit a partner in a tight, an' I reckon I'm too old to learn how now."

And Yuba nodded agreement. But there was a look of puzzlement in his eyes as they swept the little cabin.

"Had some callers today?" he asked softly.

The gambler's gaze shifted. "Some of the boys dropped in, like they always do," he answered. We played a couple of hands—for matches. I ain't handlin' cards for money no more. You know—I promised."

But one day, a month later, they found out why the little gambler had not showed signs of recovery.

The kid, who brought the hastily scrawled note to Sam and Yuba at the mine, was out of breath. Hurriedly, they knocked off work while they read it:

> Fellers: I went back on my word and have been running a stud game at the cabin, because I wanted to do my share. You'll find my poke hid under the floorboard there. It's all yours. Diamond Jim Abels, who runs the big game down town, didn't like the straight competition I was offering, so he framed me with one of his own men and a crimped deck. I was lucky and shot first. I left a note sayin' you two had nothing to do with any of the games or what I done. That I double-crossed you. Don't try to follow me. Now you can get out without havin' to think about what's going to happen to me. I would have just slowed you up. Good luck, fellers, and keep your promises better than I did mine.

White-faced, Sam and Yuba stared at one another. "They say that the trail south has been thawin' for the past couple of days," Sam said. "He couldn't of got very far. The fool—to think we'd run out on him!"

They took the trail south, and soon picked up Fancy's tracks. "Looks like we don't have to worry no more about that Seven Mile Committee arrivin'," observed Sam grimly, as he looked back.

For down there a crowd of men were already converging on the cabin. Others, looking like animated ants in the distance, were crowding about Diamond Jim Abel's Lucky Chance Bar and gambling place. Horses were being brought up. They caught the glint of sun on steel rifle barrels. . . .

Following the uneven tracks, they left the main trail and made their way up the steep side of a small canyon. There, weaving on uncertain legs, the little gambler showed himself above them at the entrance to a cave in the cliff-side. Panting, they overpowered him when he showed fight, and Yuba took him into the cave, while Big Sam, armed with the sick man's gun, crouched just inside the entrance.

It was showdown, Sam knew. Their last, and forecast as surely, as tragically, as if Fate itself had dealt the cards. To think that three men—one delirious and one a cripple—could stand off the posse of armed miners for any length of time was madness. Besides, they had but one gun. But Big Sam knew that those two were depending on him. It was up to him to play out not only his hand, but theirs as well. And to take his last desperate gamble for three lives.

He sent one shot as a warning over the heads of the posse as they came up. The next second he cursed, for the hammer snapped on an empty shell.

Then they were on him, over him, pulling him down so he could scarcely breathe, and other dark forms were running into the interior of the cave. The mayor of Alder Bar and the marshal hauled him to his feet, and detailing a man to guard him, joined the rest back in the opening.

"You damn fools!" bluff Tom Kelley, the mayor of the camp, laughed when he faced the trio. "Tryin' to think you could run out on us! We had a man stationed every day at the cabin when Fancy was playin', just watchin' to see if he'd pull any crooked tinhorn tricks. He didn't try one. In fact, we was mighty glad that there was one honest dealer in the camp, because Diamond Jim Abel shore hanged himself with his own rope when he tried to frame Fancy. You three ain't done nothing to run away for, and as for Fancy, we're givin' him the Lucky Chance saloon after Diamond Jim gets out, which he will, pronto. So far as what you've been at Seven Mile—their law don't concern us. It's what you been at Alder Bar—and what you will be. Looks to me you gents have got yourself a place to stay as long as you want it!"

And the shout of acclaim that went up from half a hundred miners' throats mercifully hid the fact that they were too choked up to make reply.

—THE MAVERICK

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world I fairly beam!

"I'm not being ostentatious
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esteem!'"

"Yes, Mr. Moore,
Yes, Mr. Moore,
It's due to methods used
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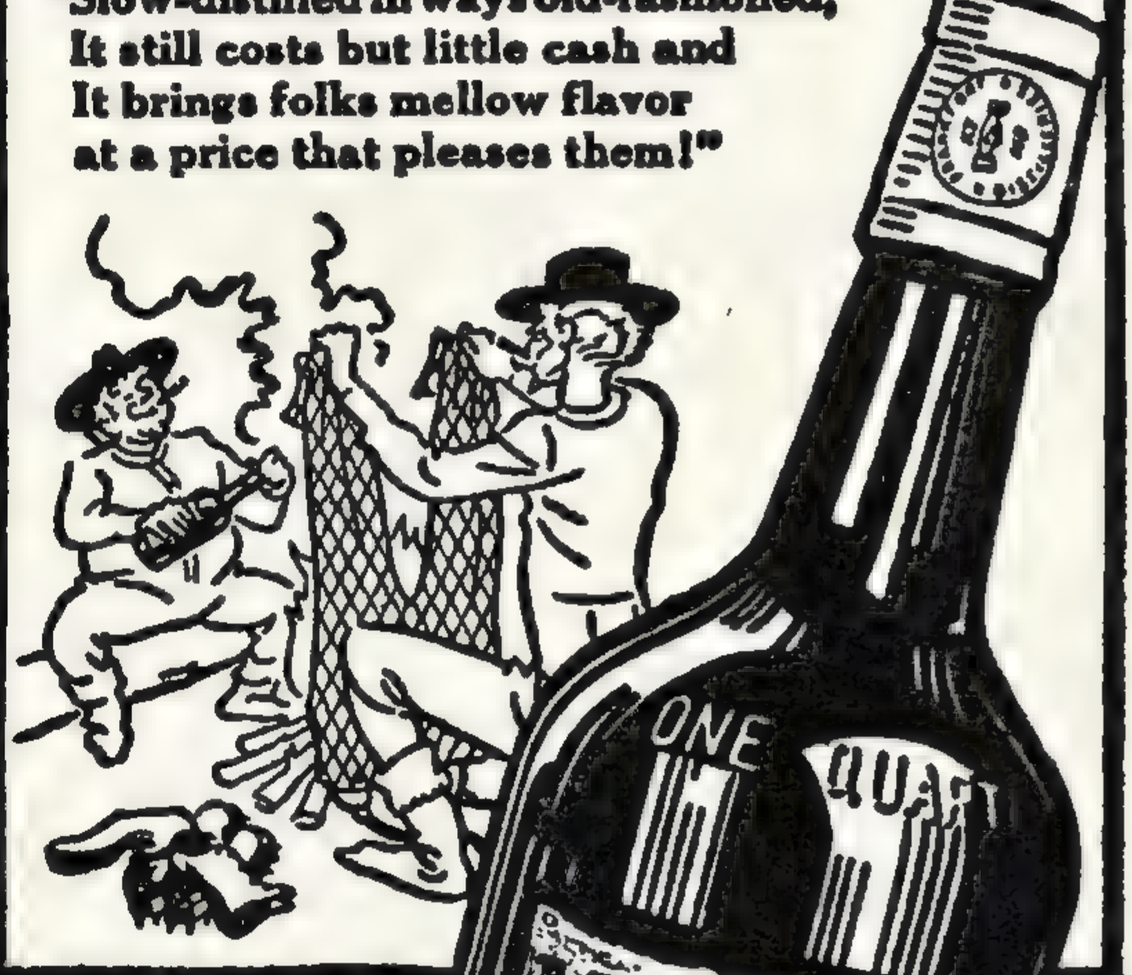
It still costs but little cash and
It brings folks mellow flavor
at a price that pleases them!"



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DEATH RIDES FOR THE DRAG R

Complete cow-country novel by

WALT COBURN

Of Danny's two cowboy partners, one slept in a boothill grave; the other would hang. But Danny could no more let a dead friend go unavenged than he could run out on a noose-doomed living one!

Danny . . . risked everything as he threw the loop. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

While the Hangnoose Waits

IT WAS some time between midnight and daybreak when the bronc rider, Jud Austin, went whiskey-loco in the Drag R bunkhouse. It all

happened so suddenly that afterwards no two men could tell the same story about just what did happen in those split seconds. There was only the light of a black-chimneyed lantern that threw tricky shadows of men in the long bunkhouse.

Big Jack Bacon, the Drag R ramrod, was sitting on top of the whiskey-crazed bronc-peeler when somebody lighted a lamp with a clean chimney. Jack Bacon tossed a six-shooter across the floor. Powdersmoke hung in the air, but the bunkhouse no longer echoed with the ear-cracking roar of a six-shooter.

"There's his gun!" panted the two-hundred-pound ramrod of the outfit. "Lend a hand with him before he gits loose!"

Sleepy-witted cowpunchers in their underwear had quit their bunks. It took Jack Bacon and three other husky men to get the shouting, fighting bronc-rider tied hand and foot and lashed down on his bunk.

Young Danny Walsh, the horse wrangler, picked up the six-shooter. The barrel of the gun was still warm, and Danny's blue eyes were wide. He was staring, the blood drained from his face, at the huddled, motionless form that blocked the bunkhouse doorway. He was looking at his first dead man, realizing that the dead man was Jud Austin's pardner and best friend, Lige Rogers.

"Don't stand there like a cow waitin' to be milked," growled big Jack Bacon. "Gimme that gun I taken off Jud. Looks like Lige is dead. The law will want this cannon as exhibit A, or somethin'. Crawl into your pants and boots, button. Saddle a horse and ride to town for the sheriff and a doctor. Rattle your hocks, yearlin'!"

They lifted Lige Rogers' dead body from the floor and laid it on his bunk, covering it with a tarp.

"Shot twice, square in the briskit!" Danny heard Jack Bacon's voice, like words in some hideous nightmare. It sounded above the groaning and moaning that came from behind Jud Austin's gritting teeth.

"This'll hang Jud," said one of the cowpunchers. "If he don't hang, he'll go locoed, anyhow. He'll sober up, and they'll tell him in jail that he's killed his pardner, Lige Rogers. They was closer'n two brothers."

Danny stumbled out of the bunkhouse. He wanted to get out of there before that lump in his throat busted, and he'd start bawling. Lige and Jud were the best friends he'd ever had. Lige with his easy-going way of helping a kid out of things that bothered him, and Jud with his joshing and jobbing and hoorawing. Teasing a kid till he nearly bawled or fought, then joshing him till he got to laughing again.

Now Lige was killed, and the law would hang Jud.

DANNY got his horse saddled and headed for town at a long lope. Tears stung his eyes and his slim body was racked with sobbing. It was the first time he had bawled like that since his father had been killed, five years ago, by a bronc at the Calgary Stampede. Danny couldn't remember his mother, because she had died when he was a few years old.

Jud Austin and Lige Rogers had taken the thirteen-year-old boy and sort of raised him. Danny's father, Wild Pat Walsh, had been their friend. Part of their cowpuncher wages and rodeo winnings always went into the bank at Chinook to pay for Danny's schooling and his board and room. They got him horse-wrangling jobs like this one he now had with the Drag R outfit.

Last year he had quit school for good. Jud and Lige had talked about heading back for Texas this fall, where they and Pat Walsh had come from years ago, with a trail herd that took them to Montana.

Well, they would never go back to Texas now. Lige would be buried, the

law would hang Jud. Hang Jud for a killing that he wouldn't remember having done.

Danny wanted to be with Jud when Jud got sobered up and they told him why he was in jail. Jud would need him now, because Jud Austin would go plumb loco when he found out he had killed Lige.

Danny cursed whiskey; cursed it with all the cuss names he had ever learned around cow-camps. He had been in town with the outfit when the Drag R cowpunchers painted Chinook, Montana, red to celebrate the end of the Spring calf round-up.

He remembered how Lige had said Jud was a man who couldn't handle whiskey. A few drinks, and Jud would want to buck his horse down the street or ride into saloons or fight somebody whom he figured had wronged him some way.

Lige claimed that it was because Jud had sat too many broncs, and the jolting and jarring he'd taken, the falls he'd picked up when he got piled up by a bad 'un he couldn't set, had done something to Jud's brain. Lige always made excuses for Jud thataway. Like he'd always had some good reason handy if Danny made a mistake when he was learning how to punch cows. That was Lige Rogers' way.

Lige couldn't be on hand to make any more excuses for Jud Austin now. Lige couldn't take the witness stand in defense of the man who had killed him. But if Lige could come back to clear Jud, Danny told himself, he'd shore do it.

The Drag R outfit had come back to the ranch from town, all of them feeling their whiskey. Lige had kept Jud from tying into big Jack Bacon on the way home. Jud had wanted to overtake the Drag R ramrod who was riding a mile or so ahead, and drag it out of him.

"And you know damn well why I got it in for the big son, Lige," Danny had heard Jud say. "You feel the same way I do about him, only you're too easy-goin' to tackle 'im. That big son of a snake needs killin', and I'm the huckleberry for the job. Gimme back my gun, Lige, and I'll ketch up with Jack Bacon, tell him what a low-down skunk he is, and make him claw for that gun he claims he cut his teeth on when he was a baby."

But Lige had argued patiently as they rode along: "Kill Jack Bacon, Jud, and you'll hang for it! He's part owner of the Drag R and that dude pardner of his would buy a judge and jury that would hang you higher'n a kite. Then I'd have to kill the dude and I'd hang. Then what would become of Danny? You'll tell me I'm right when you sober up, Jud. And you don't git your gun till you git cold sober."

Recalling that, Danny pulled up with a queer, choked cry. For Lige had taken Jud's six-shooter away from him! He had told Jud he wouldn't give him back his gun till he got cold sober. And nobody in the outfit was staking Jud to a gun till he did get sober.

"Jud didn't kill Lige! Jud didn't!" Danny's voice was a croaking sob of joy. "Lige! Lige, he didn't kill yuh! Jud didn't do it! Jud didn't have his six-shooter tonight. Oh, God, do somethin' about it! You got to let Lige come back somehow and prove it! Lige is up yonder with You. He knows his pardner Jud, even if Jud was locoed drunk, never killed him! Big Jack Bacon's got it in for Jud. He'll buy a judge and jury, like Lige said, and hang Jud. Oh, God, can't you figger out somethin'? You and Lige. Please God, don't let 'em hang Jud! You side him and I'll swear I'll never do an ornery thing as long as I live. Neither will Jud Austin. Jud'll never take another damn drink. . . ."

Danny's tear-filled eyes were lifted to the morning star that was fading with the dawn. His horse carried him along the wagon road to town.

At sunrise he got the sheriff out of bed.

The boy's eyes were dry now, red-rimmed, bloodshot from weeping, but the hard lump was no longer choking his throat. His voice was steady when he talked to lanky Ike Niber, the sheriff, who stood in the doorway in a night shirt that came to his knees. Ike had his hat on and a cigarette in his mouth.

"What fetches you here this hour of the mornin'," he asked, pulling at his reddish mustache. "I got two Drag R men in the calaboose, and I'll turn 'em loose directly they sober up but not till then. If this is some fool jobbin' trick Jud Austin is puttin' you up to to git a man outa bed—"

"No, sir. I just come from the ranch. Lige Rogers got killed. They're holdin' Jud, claimin' he done it. But he didn't, Sheriff. Jud didn't have a gun. Jack Bacon's got it in for Jud and Lige. He's hidin' the facts and blamin' Jud—"

"Come inside, Danny, and we'll have some coffee. Doughnuts, mebby, if the missus has any in the jar. You look kinda peaked. If you say Jud didn't do it, that settles it."

"You mean that, Sheriff? You mean they won't hang Jud?"

"Nobody's hangin' Jud Austin if he didn't kill Lige Rogers, son. Jud's wild and ornery when he's drunk, but I reckon you and me know that he never killed his pardner. Come in and we'll talk 'er over."

"I got to get holt of the doctor. Jud's in bad shape."

"Hurt? Jud's shot, too?"

"No, sir. Jud ain't shot. He ain't sober yet, and he was groanin' bad. I bet Jack Bacon hit him over the head with a gun while they was fightin'. It was too dark in the bunkhouse to see good. Jud was fightin' and they was piled up on him. I got to git the doctor, Sheriff!"

"Fetch him here, then, while I git my pants on. By the time you git back, breakfast will be ready. You can't do much good on an empty paunch, Danny. Fetch Doc Clay over to the house. Half an hour, and we'll be on our way to the ranch. And Danny, don't say a word to Doc or anybody about Jud not havin' a gun. That's between me'n you. That's our ace in the hole. We ain't turnin' it over till all the cards is face up on the table!"

CHAPTER TWO

Partner of the Damned

JUD AUSTIN was conscious when Danny and Sheriff Ike Niber got back to the ranch. He was still tied to the bunk where he lay, his bloodshot eyes staring blankly at the ceiling, his face set in hard, grim lines, gray as old putty.

Big Jack Bacon got up from the chair near the bunk. He pointed towards the bulge under the tarp on Lige Rogers' bunk. "Lige is under the tarp, Sheriff. I've had to keep Jud Austin tied. No tellin' what he'd do if he slipped them ropes."

Jud's head turned and his bloodshot eyes glared at the Drag R ramrod. But no word left his tightly pulled lips.

Danny ran past Jack Bacon before the big ramrod could stop him. Jud recognized the boy and tried to grin.

"Danny, button," he muttered. "What happened? Tell me that big son of a snake is lyin'!"

Danny's head bent down against Jud's. He whispered into the bronc-rider's ear. "You didn't do it, Jud. I'll prove it for yuh later. But don't let on to nobody. Let 'em tell it their way. Play dumb. Savvy?"

"I savvy, pardner. God A'mighty, button, you don't know how much you just done for me!"

Ike was keeping Jack Bacon at the other end of the bunkhouse. Danny was trying to keep his voice from breaking as Ike pulled back the tarp and looked at Lige's dead body.

"Ike's lettin' me go to jail with you,

Jud, if you need me. But if you kin tough it out without me, I'll stay on here. I know I kin find out who killed Lige, if I keep on here at the Drag R."

"You can't stay on here without gittin' into trouble, button. Jack Bacon knows how you and me stand. He'd drag it out of a kid like you. I don't put nothin' past that jasper."

"You got to let me tackle it, Jud," whispered Danny. "It's our only chance to find out—"

Jack Bacon had turned away from the sheriff and came the length of the bunkhouse with long-legged strides, a black scowl on his face.

"What's goin' on back here? You tryin' to work them ropes loose, you young coyote? Git away from Jud Austin, or I'll slap the ears off yuh!"

BACON jerked Danny roughly by the shoulder. Jud strained at his ropes trying to get free, and Sheriff Ike Niber came up. His humorous eyes were hard.

"That'll be about enough of that, Bacon. Let the boy alone. Stand back and let 'im talk to Jud Austin if he's a mind to. Jud and Lige raised him."

The sheriff looked down at the bronc-rider. "Give me your word you'll behave, Jud, and I'll cut you loose."

"I'd like to have just one good swing at Bacon, Ike. One is all I need."

"Can't stand for that, Jud."

"Give me a gun. Bacon's got his. I'll lock horns with that big son and when I git done with him—"

"That talk ain't gettin' you nowhere, Jud," said Ike. "I don't want to put handcuffs on you, but. . . ."

"You're the boss, Ike," said Jud Austin. "I'll go peaceful. Danny, will you saddle my private horse? Throw Lige's saddle on his Monte horse. Git Lige's warsack and mine. Though I reckon Jack Bacon has robbed 'em both before now. I only come alive a little while ago to find that big son settin' on my bunk. He's bin tellin' me how I killed Lige. He'd go over and pull the tarp back so's I could see Lige dead, then Bacon would cuss me. When I'd try to git at him he'd slap at my face. My head feels like I'd bin worked over with a gun-barrel. Take Danny to town with us, Ike. He don't have to put up with Jack Bacon's damned abuse."

"Danny," said Jack Bacon, "stays right here. He can't leave me short-handed without a horse-jingler. He's in the hole, anyhow. Owes the Drag R thirty-seven dollars."

"That's right," said Danny. "I drawed that much ahead when we was in town. Sent off for a new saddle and a pair of boots and I didn't have enough money to pay the balance due on 'em. I'll git along with Jack Bacon. I reckon it's the whiskey in you, Jud, that's talkin'. Jack ain't abusin' me none. You go on in with the Sheriff, Jud. I'll come to see you as quick as I kin make 'er."

"You'll have to come in for the inquest, Danny," said the sheriff. "You, too, Bacon, and all the other Drag R men that was in the bunkhouse when this happened. Jud, it's my duty to warn you that anything you say now or later kin be used as evidence against you."

"I'll shut up, Ike," said Jud quietly. "I'll go peaceful. But if any harm comes to Danny, Bacon, I'll live long enough to kill you. Just remember that. Danny, button, saddle my Concho pony and throw Lige's saddle on his Monte horse. Load our warsacks on Lige's saddle."

Ike Niber took out his jackknife to cut Jud free. Jack Bacon growled a quick protest. "That man's a killer. He's still loco drunk, Ike. You cut him loose and he'll try to kill me."

"I reckon not, Bacon," smiled the sheriff. "If you're scairt, drag it. Git outa sight."

The sheriff cut Jud loose. Bacon stood

back, his gun in his hand. Jud Austin ignored the big Drag R ramrod. The bronc-peeler got his warsack that held his clothes. Then, the sheriff at his side, he got Lige's warsack that held his belongings. Jud lifted the tarp and looked down into the blood-smeared face of his dead pardner. For a long moment he stood there, his face as gray as that of the dead man. Then he gently put the tarp back.

"I'm ready to go, Ike."

Danny brought around the two saddled horses. Jud tied the two filled warsacks on Lige's saddle.

"So-long, Danny. Don't fret about me." Jud spoke in a tone loud enough to reach the ears of Jack Bacon who stood, his hand on his gun, in the bunkhouse doorway. "If I killed Lige," Jud's voice sounded husky, "I shore mistaken him for somebody about Bacon's size. Lige won't be holdin' it ag'in' me."

"I'll see you in town when they hold the inquest," Danny tried to hold his voice steady as he felt the grip of Jud's big hand.

Danny watched the sheriff and Jud ride away, Jud leading Lige's horse. The doctor, driving his team of fat bays, met them. They stopped and talked, then the doctor, who was also the coroner, came on toward the ranch buildings.

Not a single Drag R cowpuncher was in sight. Danny reckoned that Jack Bacon had sent them all away on some pretext or another to get them out of sight of Jud. Jud had a lot of friends in the outfit who wouldn't stand idly by and see him abused.

A COWPUNCHER named Art Caufield came from the cook house. His long legs were not tracking any too well, and his eyes were bloodshot from whiskey. He intercepted Jack Bacon as the latter walked out to meet the doctor. Danny was standing in the bunkhouse door.

"I want what's comin' to me, Jack. I'm pullin' out—driftin' south where the climate fits my clothes. Make out my time, Jack."

"You're drunk, Art." Jack Bacon's voice was ugly. "You're too drunk to go anywheres."

"Since when did you git the job of tellin' me when I had enough to drink? I said I was drawin' what I had comin' here. All of it, savvy? Right down to the last damn dollar. I want 'er right now, hear me?"

"I hear you, Art."

Jack Bacon's fist crashed into the drunken cowpuncher's jaw. As Art Caufield's knees buckled, Bacon let go another heavy fist that dropped the long legged cowpuncher in the dirt.

Doc Clay drove up, his fat bays sweat-streaked, dust-powdered. He looked at the unconscious cowpuncher in the dirt, then at the Drag R ramrod.

"Having a little trouble, Bacon?" Doc's voice was pleasant. His smile was innocent, but his sharp eyes missed nothing.

"One or two of the boys ain't got over their town drunks. Jud Austin was one of 'em. Art Caufield, here, was another. Jud killed Lige Rogers before he sobered up. I'm takin' Art's smokepole before he gits notions." He stooped and took the unconscious Caufield's gun from its holster, shoving it into the waistband of his overalls.

"A man roddin' an outfit, Doc," said Jack Bacon, "has to work his men hard if he hopes to git the job done. Some gents like Jud Austin and Art Caufield can't stand the gaff without bellyachin' and roarin'. Art was a good friend of Jud's. He's ornery and sullen because I sent Jud Austin to town with the sheriff. He'll feel better when he sobers up. I'll git somebody to take your team, Doc."

Jack Bacon sighted Danny in the bunkhouse doorway and called him. "Take Doc Clay's team and put 'em in the barn, Danny. Then you better ride the horse-

pasture fence. It might need fixin'. Take hammer and staples and ride every damned strang of it."

Danny climbed into Doc Clay's buggy and took the lines. Doc caught his eye and winked, then climbed down and started to lift the unconscious Art Caufield to drag him to the bunkhouse.

"Hell, Doc," snapped Jack Bacon impatiently, "let 'im lay. It'll do 'im good to sleep 'er off outside."

Doc Clay hesitated, then nodded, letting Art Caufield's head and shoulders rest once more in the dirt.

"You're the boss here, Bacon. Won't he wake up fightin'?"

"Mebby. But that won't buy him nothin' but a real whippin' if he takes a notion to paw dirt and beller."

Danny drove the team to the barn. He unhooked them and helped the barn man pull off their harness and stable them. He saddled a fresh horse and hung a bag of staples and hammer on his saddle horn. He kept stalling, watching Art Caufield and the bunkhouse.

He saw Art Caufield sit up, rubbing his jaw. Then the lanky cowpuncher got to his feet. He started for the bunkhouse, then changed his mind. He came on to the barn, his long legs more unsteady than ever.

DANNY knew Art Caufield's ways. Jack Bacon had lied about Art being Jud Austin's friend. Art Caufield, treacherous and a trouble-maker, was what Jud called "teacher's pet" around the outfit. Art carried tales to Jack Bacon, some of them lies, some the truth. Because he toadied to Jack Bacon he got the easiest, softest jobs around the outfit. He rode the best string of horses and drew better wages than the other cowpunchers. Art was a fast roper and had won money at Cheyenne and Calgary. A fancy dresser, even on the round-up or at the ranch, he wore his buckskin-foxed plaid Oregon pants stuffed in the fancy tops of his alligator boots. But his carved gun holster was empty now.

Bacon had his pearl-handled six-shooter, and Art Caufield knew it. Art would have a headache and a thirst. Danny knew that as he fooled around the barn.

Art Caufield stopped at the pump and washed his face. He dried his hands and face on his handkerchief and came into the barn. He was scowling blackly.

He hardly glanced at Danny as he went into the stall where he kept his horse and pawed for a couple of minutes in the hay-filled manger. He pulled out a bottle, cursing thickly when he saw that it was empty, save for a little in the bottom of the bottle. He drained the scanty contents and hurled the bottle out through the doorway onto the manure pile.

"Some dirty, low-down whiskey thief located that bottle." He was glaring now at Danny.

"Don't be jumpin' me, Art. I shore never touched it. You want a drink?"

"You know damn well I do."

"I know where there's a bottle—one that Lige taken from Jud. Neither of 'em will be usin' it now."

"To hell with their bottle! I'd choke to death for a drink before I'd—" Art Caufield broke off suddenly. His bloodshot black eyes stared hard at Danny.

"Was you asleep when Lige was shot?" he asked Danny suddenly.

"About half asleep, I reckon. I was in the next bunk to Jud. He'd kept me awake till late augerin' and then snorin' and tossin' and talkin' in his sleep. You know. You was right acrost from Jud."

"But you didn't see the shootin'?"

"Not exactly, Art. It all come so sudden. I was half asleep."

"If you'd seen Jud shoot you'd remember it, wouldn't yuh? The flash of his gun and how he was standin'. You'd recollect them things? You'd be able to tell a judge and jury what you saw?"

"Shore thing." Danny nodded his head slowly.

"But you didn't see the gun-flame?"

"What if I did, Art?"

"But you just said you didn't, you damn little idiot! Ain't that what you said? Ain't it?"

The tall cowpuncher was standing over Danny now, his strong lean fingers gripping the boy's shoulders and shaking him. Art's bloodshot black eyes looked like slits of red fire. His face was twitching around his mouth and nostrils.

"Let go of me, Art! Gosh, you're as locoed as Jud when you're gittin' over one."

Danny ducked, twisted free of the hands he thought were going to close around his throat. He got outside and onto his horse before Art Caufield could grab him.

Art Caufield stood on widespread, swaying legs. His face was a sickly yellow color. "If I had a gun, you sneakin' little coyote, I'd break you from runnin'." His voice was a hoarse shout.

Jack Bacon and little Doc Clay came into sight. Bacon and Doc must have heard Art Caufield's words. Bacon was scowling blackly.

"What the hell's goin' on around here? I told you to ride that horse pasture fence, button."

"I was startin' to," said Danny, "when Art showed up. His bottle that he had hid in the manger was empty. He's got a notion I had somethin' to do with it. Ain't that it, Art?"

Art Caufield nodded his head, licking his bruised lips with a dry tongue. "That's it. You know how it is when you find somebody's stole the likker you'd hid to sober up on. I wasn't goin' to hurt the button. Hell, it was just a bluff I was runnin' to throw a scare into him."

Little Doc Clay looked hard at Art Caufield. Then he turned to Jack Bacon. "If anything happens to this boy, Bacon, I'll have Caufield locked up and the key thrown away. That was ugly talk, and he was drunk enough to mean it. Was this man Caufield in the bunkhouse when Lige Rogers was shot?"

"Caufield?" Jack Bacon scratched his head as if thinking hard. "Nope. I don't think he was, Doc. Was you, Art?"

CHAPTER THREE

Rustlers' Cache

ART CAUFIELD hesitated. His bloodshot eyes shifted to Danny. And the boy spoke up before Art Caufield could find an answer. "Art wasn't there, as I remember. I didn't see him. You come in later, didn't you, Art?"

"Yeah. . . . Yeah, the button's right. I come in after the shootin'. The snorin' and racket that Jud had bin makin' was too much fer me. I'd gone to the barn to sleep. I wasn't too sober, myself. That town booze shore stays with a man."

"It shore does," growled Jack Bacon, "when he fetches half a saloon back to the ranch with him, wrapped up in his slicker. Doc, if you had a dozen bottle-nursin' cowhands to sober up and git back to work, you'd have somethin' to put white hairs in your head."

"I don't doubt it, Bacon. Yours is a tough job. All I have to do is ride all over the country bringing babies into the world, patch up a few bullet holes here and there, keep men from dying—little chores like that. I get what sleep I can when I head my team down the road and wrap the lines around the buggy whip. I'll be on my way. Have Lige Rogers' body sent to town immediately. Inquest tomorrow. I'll want you and young Danny and every man who was in the bunkhouse last night to be at the inquest. You'll see that every man is there?"

"Who is goin' to do the work here at the ranch if—"

"Will Ike have to come out here with

bench warrants or will you have your men in town?" Doc's tone was impatient.

"I'll see that every damn man gits there, Doc. It throws the outfit short-handed but your say-so goes with me. Danny, never mind ridin' that fence. Git Doc's team hooked up. Art, git on to the cook house an' git some black coffee and a can of tomatoes. You look like hell!"

Danny helped Doc Clay hook up his fat bays. Doc fussed over them as he would over his patients, when he fished in his pocket and brought out some lump sugar. He fed the sugar to the bays. Jack Bacon was standing impatiently by, waiting for Doc Clay to get going.

"Don't wait, Bacon. Go look after that Caufield fellow. And if there's going to be another shooting at the Drag R, get it over with right now and save me another trip back here. Danny will help me get started."

Jack Bacon was only too anxious to get to the cook house. When he was out of earshot, Doc Clay smiled faintly at Danny.

"Art Caufield was in the bunkhouse when Lige Rogers was shot, Danny?"

"Yes, sir. I'd swear I saw him. But he got out somehow. And it was when the light was bright and Jack Bacon was straddlin' Jud that Art Caufield come in through the door. He had all his clothes on, too. Nobody else had on much but their underwear and shirts or whatever they slept in."

"But you lied to back Bacon's statement. Why?"

"Because I want to see how they'll play their game."

"Better come to town with me, Danny. I don't like Caufield's looks. You're not safe here."

Danny shook his head. "I got to stay here. Did the sheriff git the gun that killed Lige? I forgot to ask him."

"He got it. Jack Bacon turned it over to him."

Danny nodded wisely. He looked around to make certain nobody was watching. Then he spoke in a low tone to Doc.

"I'll be back in a minute. Wait."

DANNY ran into the barn. He scrambled monkeylike up the ladder nailed to the log wall that led to the big hayloft above. He climbed over the hay and dug into a far corner. He found a quart bottle of whiskey there and a black-handled six-shooter. He shoved the gun under his shirt and into the waistband of his overalls.

Back outside, he slipped the gun from under his shirt and shoved it behind the doctor's black bag.

"Give that six-shooter to the sheriff," Danny whispered tensely. "Tell him to show it to Jud, just as it is. Then put it away."

"For one young cowboy," smiled Doc, "you can be as wise and as mysterious as a tree full of owls. I'll do as you say, Danny. And I'll see you in town tomorrow."

Doc Clay had hardly driven away when Jack Bacon and Art Caufield came from the cook-house. Bacon motioned Danny to come with them into the barn. They both looked pretty grim.

For a few moments fear gripped the boy's heart in an icy, clammy hand that seemed to smother its pulse. He wondered if they were going to kill him then and there. The blood had drained from his face so that the freckles stood out like brown warts.

"Art didn't mean what he said," said Jack Bacon. "He wants to tell you so, button."

"Forget it, Danny," said Art. Danny knew that he'd had a drink or two with Jack Bacon. Art's nerves were steady enough now.

"Did you see Art in the bunkhouse, kid? Or didn't you?"

"You said he wasn't in there. I just backed your play," said Danny. "I figured you had your reasons."

Jack Bacon stared hard at the boy. Danny met the scrutiny without flinching. The Drag R ramrod turned to Art Caufield. "The button has more sense than a heap of cowhands I know, includin' you, Caufield."

"Too much sense, mebby," said Caufield who was still sullen from the tongue-lashing Bacon had given him in the cookhouse.

"Jud Austin," said Bacon slowly, "killed Lige Rogers. You know how locoed Jud is when he's drunk. You seen me knock him down and take away his gun before he shot somebody else with it. There ain't no use in gittin' Art here mixed up in it, even as a witness. Somebody's got to stay here to look after the ranch while the rest of us are in town at the inquest."

"You never seen me in the bunkhouse, button," said Caufield, his tone ugly again. "because I wasn't there. I heard the shootin' and I come in about the time the gunsmoke cleared. You tell 'em that when you take the stand, hear me?"

"The kid will tell that on the stand. Won't you, Danny? Because if you treat the outfit right, you got a good job here as long as you want it. I'll make a real hand outa you. You'll git cowpuncher wages and do cowpuncher work. I'll cut you a string of top ponies that any man would be proud to ride. String your bets with Jack Bacon and some day you'll own your own spread. Just think that over, button.

"I know you thought a heap of Jud Austin and Lige Rogers. Now Lige is dead and Jud will either hang or do a life stretch at Deer Lodge. You ain't got a friend left that you kin bank on. Nary a friend, kid, exceptin' Jack Bacon and the Drag R outfit. Treat me right, and you'll be the luckiest yearlin' on a ranch."

"Yes, sir." Danny tried to act grateful to the big Drag R boss.

"You know what was behind that shootin'?" Bacon, evidently satisfied with the progress he was making, waxed bolder, more confident.

"Jud was locoed drunk, I reckon."

"More than that. Jud knowed what he was a-doin'. He had it in for Lige Rogers on account of Norah Devlin, the schoolmarm that teaches the school over on Big Warm Crick. Jud and Lige was both a-sparkin' her, and Lige was beatin' Jud's time. That's what was in Jud's craw. It'll all come out at the trial. Me'n Art overheard Jud and Lige a-janglin' over her one night here at the ranch before the round-up started. Lige give Norah Devlin a spotted pony for her birthday. And he taken her to a dance that Jud was aimin' to take her to. It'll all come out at the trial. Yeah, Jud was layin' for Lige."

Danny said nothing. Norah Devlin had taught him through several grades at the little country school on Big Warm. Jud and Lige had tossed up a dollar to see who would give her the spotted pony. He wondered, thinking of her now for the first time since the swift tragedy, how Norah Devlin would take it. She thought a lot of Lige and Jud. . . . But it wasn't like Jack Bacon was aiming to tell it at the trial.

Norah had turned down both the pardners. She had told them each just about the same thing—that she didn't love either of them; that she wanted them both for her friends.

"About that new string of ponies you'll be ridin'," said Jack Bacon. "I'm cuttin' you that Cuter roan, Meadowlark, Big Enough, Sandburr, Christmas, Buster, Star, Gold Heels, Nigger and Dusty. Caufield is goin' to fix you up with a new saddle. You'll git forty a month. Now take a ride for an hour or so and watch your shadder on the grass."

DANNY, riding alone down in the lower pasture, wondered if the Drag R ramrod was plumb fool enough to believe he could buy off even an orphan kid that easy. Or was Bacon just soft-soaping him along until after the inquest tomorrow?

Either Bacon or Caufield had killed Lige. And he reckoned he knew at least one reason why Jack Bacon wanted Lige killed and Jud in the pen. That reason was Norah Devlin. But there would be other, stronger reasons for that framed murder. Jud would know, perhaps. Maybe something would turn up tomorrow at the inquest.

There was a big reservoir in the lower pasture where the Drag R had dammed the creek, to irrigate the big alfalfa field and the bluejoint and timothy meadows. Danny and Jud and Lige had been in the habit of riding down there whenever the chance offered to swim. . . . The cool water of the reservoir looked inviting now.

Danny dismounted and peeled off his clothes on the bank near the dirt dam that was rip-rapped with tree trunks and willows. Tall willows grew thickly along the top of the dam.

Danny had taken to water as naturally as a young duck. He could dive and swim better than any man on the ranch. He dove in now and the water cooled all the feverish emotions that had for hours been burning inside him. He swam under water, exploring beaver holes and muskrat holes. In the crystal-clear water he forgot his misery and grief and fears as he took deep breaths, trying to see how long he could remain under by clinging to the mossy rip-rapping of willows and tree trunks.

Filling his lungs with air, he dove deep and grabbed at what he thought was a moss-covered log. Instead, what he clung to was a rolled-up hide, the hair now slimy with moss.

Danny dragged it to the surface and swam ashore with it. He dragged it up on the grassy bank and examined it. The hide, rolled with the hair side in, was tied with heavy rawhide string and weighted with a big rock. There had been another weight, but the leather string that held it had been broken somehow. Danny rubbed the green slime from the hide. He got his jackknife and cut the string, unrolling it on the ground.

It was not, as he had expected, a beef hide with the brand cut out. It was the hide of a blue roan apaluse horse. White spots, as big as a man's hand, were on the hind quarters and across the rump. Danny, his heart pounding, felt along on the under side of the hide for a brand. His probing, unsteady fingers found the brand he was searching for. He rubbed the hide clean and traced the brand on the underside. A Diamond was on the left shoulder.

DANNY worked feverishly now. He rolled the hide up and tied it with the string. Then he dragged it back into the water and dove underneath with it. There was an old beaver hole about the middle of the dam, not more than three feet below the surface. By repeated diving he managed to stuff the horse-hide into the hole which he covered with willow rip-rapping.

He had hardly completed the task when he saw Art Caufield riding towards the dam.

Danny's horse, bridle reins dragging, had grazed off a ways and was screened by the willows that grew along the creek, so that Art Caufield was unaware of Danny's presence until the boy climbed up the reservoir bank where his clothes were.

Caufield, not more than fifty feet away, reined up with a quick oath as he saw the young horse-wrangler standing there naked and dripping. Across the front of Caufield's saddle was a tightly rolled beef hide, and a similar roll was tied behind the saddle cantle.

Danny knew that it was the hide of the beef Caufield and Bacon had butchered yesterday evening. The hide had been cut in two, and the brands cut out. Now, rolled up and weighted, it was ready to be thrown into the reservoir. It was only half a secret that Bacon butchered beef that belonged to the neighboring cow outfits.

"What the hell you doin' here?" Caufield's voice had an ominous growl in it.

"Just takin' a swim. Come on in, Art. The water ain't too cold." Danny's teeth were chattering from his long and frequent submergings.

"Git into your clothes, you damned little sneak. Fork your horse and git back to the ranch. I've seen about all of you I kin stand for one day. Who the hell told you you could swim here?"

"Nobody. Bacon never posted any no-swimmin' signs here. Gosh, Art, you don't need to be scared I'll blab about the hide you got there. What good would it do me or anybody? There's no brand on the hide. I ain't a greenhorn pilgrim. The Drag R ain't the only outfit that don't eat their own beef. Goshamighty, Art, don't git on the prod again. You know I ain't a squealer." Danny, his teeth chattering from cold more than fear, tried to grin. "I'll even help you sink those hunks of hide if you want."

"Git your horse and go back to the ranch," growled Caufield, somewhat mollified by the boy's words. "Keep your trap shut, otherwise you might git a rock tied around that neck of yourn. Hides ain't the only thing that'll sink in this reservoir!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Dead Man's Gun

DANNY slept uneasily that night. At the slightest sound in the bunkhouse he was wide awake. His right hand never let go of the six-shooter he kept hidden under his blankets. The other cowpunchers shared something of the young horse-wrangler's uneasiness.

Jack Bacon and Art Caufield had remained in the cook-house after supper. Bacon came into the bunkhouse about ten o'clock. He was a little drunk and in an ugly, surly mood. Art Caufield didn't come in. Danny was certain he heard him ride away just after Bacon went to bed.

Nor did Caufield show up at breakfast time. Jack Bacon told his men that they had to go to town to the coroner's inquest and Jud's preliminary hearing.

"And I'll fire any man that gits drunk in town," he told them gruffly. "Tell that coroner what you saw happen—no more, no less. You seen me take that gun away from Jud Austin after he killed Lige Rogers. That's all you know about it. I don't want the law a-tyin' up my whole round-up crew. After the hearin', you kin take on a few drinks. But you'll stay sober till then and you'll leave town when I tell you to pull out. Saddle your horses."

Danny wondered where Caufield had gone, but he dared not ask. He saddled Cuter, a chunky little brown gelding, and rode to town with the rest of the outfit. Bacon rode alongside him most of the way, taking good care that the boy didn't get a chance to talk to the Drag R cowpunchers, most of whom liked Jud as much as they disliked the Drag R ramrod. Only the fact that the Drag R paid top wages, furnished good grub and mounted them on top horses kept them from quitting Jack Bacon when he got on one of his sullen, surly spells. Mostly they were afraid of Bacon. He bragged that he could fist-whip any man who worked for him, and had proved it on several occasions. Art Caufield was the only cowpuncher who took liberties with Jack Bacon.

Danny was relieved when they reached town. The sheriff called him into his office and closed the door in Bacon's face. When

he was sure that the Drag R boss had gone on down the street, Sheriff Ike Niber spoke.

"That was Jud's gun you gave Doc. Jud identified it. It hadn't been fired. Where did you git a-holt of it, son?"

"Lige taken it off Jud when he taken Jud's bottle. That was on the way from town to the ranch. Lige had me hid the six-shooter and the bottle in the hayloft."

"You're long-headed, for a boy, Danny. Anything happen at the ranch? Doc was worried about you after he left you there."

"What kind of a horse was Jerry Devlin ridin' when he disappeared about a year ago?" asked Danny.

"A blue roan apaluse. Big white spots on his hind quarters. Branded with Devlin's Diamond on the left shoulder. You knowed that apaluse horse, Danny. Why?"

"Jerry Devlin," said Danny, "Miss Norah's brother, was supposed to have quit the country and taken the outlaw trail, wasn't he?"

"That's it, son. Jack Bacon had him arrested for rustlin' Drag R cattle. Jerry got out under bond. The day before he was to come up for trial, he left his ranch, tellin' Norah he was goin' to town to report to me. He never reached town. Nobody's seen him since. Now what do you figger that's got to do with Jud's hearin'?"

"Nothin', mebby. But the hide of Jerry Devlin's apaluse horse is in the reservoir at the Drag R ranch."

SHERIFF IKE NIBER was not easily excited. But he was out of his chair with a jump, tugging at his moustache, staring at Danny. "You're plumb certain, Danny?"

"I examined the hide and hid it again where nobody kin find it but me. I didn't dare try to fetch it. Art Caufield like to caught me. He come to dump a beef hide in the reservoir. I'd just finished hidin' the horse-hide. He said somethin' about tyin' a rock to my neck and droppin' me in behind the dam. I was wonderin' if that's what happened to Jerry Devlin."

Ike Niber nodded. "You've stumbled onto just what I've suspected from the start, son. Jerry Devlin had to mortgage his outfit to the hilt to raise money for his bond. The Drag R wanted his Diamond ranch, but Jerry would never sell. Now Bacon, actin' for the Drag R, is takin' over that mortgage from the bank. They own Jerry Devlin's place on Big Warm. Danny, how'd you find that hide?"

"I was swimmin' and divin' around."

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"The water's deep there by the dam, ain't it?"

"Twenty-five of thirty feet deep, sir."

"If Jerry Devlin was murdered," the sheriff mused aloud, "They'd like as not put his body in a sack and weight it with rocks or iron. Sink it. With grapplin' hooks, a man might drag up somethin'."

"Jack Bacon was framin' up that rustlin' charge against Jerry Devlin, sir," said Danny. "Lige and Jud was workin' to clear him. Lige found out somethin' the other day, the last time he was in town. He didn't tell Jud because Jud was drinkin'. Lige told me he had somethin' to talk over with Jud that had to do with Jerry Devlin. I figured Lige had heard from Jerry."

"You're doin' a man's job of it, son," said the sheriff. "It's got plenty of danger in it. Caufield is bad medicine; he's got a tough record. He did time down in Oklahoma for rustlin'. He killed two men down there after he was pardoned out. Jack Bacon comes from the same part of the country down in the Cherokee Strip."

"I'd give a heap to send 'em both over the road to Deer Lodge. But a judge and jury demand a lot of solid proof. And the Drag R has plenty of money to hire smart lawyers to defend men like Bacon and Caufield." Sheriff Ike Niber lowered his voice instinctively, his hand gripping Danny's shoulder.

"Plenty of money, you understand, son," he added, "to railroad a man like Jud Austin. It's goin' to be a tough job to clear Jud. Right now, we ain't got a foot to stand on. Until we git somethin' besides our own personal views to tell about, I'm havin' you kept off the witness stand. A smart lawyer would tangle you up in your own rope in no time."

"You mean I won't be called today."

"Today or any other day, son, till you got somethin' to tell that will clear Jud Austin of this murder charge. Now trot on down the street to git yourself some ice-cream. Before you leave town you kin visit Jud at the jail."

Danny had to be content with that. Ike Niber was keeping him away from the coroner's inquest. He tried his best to enjoy the ice-cream he ordered at the drug store, but the druggist, a garrulous, inquisitive man, pestered him with countless questions until the young horse-wrangler left the place, his ice-cream unfinished.

NORAH DEVLIN hailed him from across the street and when he joined her, she walked him to the edge of town. Her eyes, dark blue, with heavy black lashes, were red from weeping. But there was a grim set to her square little chin that Danny had seen before when she was about to handle some unruly pupil.

Norah Devlin, he told himself, was on the prod. She had sand and lots of it. He waited for her to break the silence when they finally sat down on the river bank in the shade of a giant cottonwood tree.

"I've seen Jud," she said. "He told me all about it, or what he could remember. He said you were better than a dozen men in a tight, Danny. But he's afraid they'll do you some harm. He wanted me to get you out of Jack Bacon's reach. Will you let me buy you a ticket to Helena? You can stay there with friends of mine."

"No, ma'am," said Danny stubbornly. "I've got to stay at the Drag R ranch. I'm the only one that kin find out things. Because I'm a kid, they don't pay much attention to me. I've got to go back to the ranch and play my string out."

"So I figured," she said. "I hadn't any big hopes of dissuading you, Danny. The Drag R doesn't take over Jerry's ranch till next month. I'm moving out there tomorrow. It's only ten miles from the Drag R home ranch, and I'm going to ask Jack Bacon to let you stay there with me because I'm afraid to stay alone. I know how to handle that spur jingler. How would you take to that for a job—riding

herd on your schoolmarm. We could sort of work together. Is it a deal?"

"You bet it's a deal! Gosh, that would give me chances at night to slip off and maybe find out somethin'. The outfit will be off on the round-up. I could slip over to the ranch after dark and dive till I got somethin' with the grapplin' hooks—" Suddenly Danny broke off.

Norah Devlin looked at him, puzzled. "What's wrong with you, Danny? What's this about diving and grappling hooks. Danny, what are you holding out on me?"

She wormed it out of him. Norah Devlin's face was chalk-white by the time the boy had blurted out the story of the horse hide. But no tears came to her eyes that were hard as blue glass now.

"I've known he was dead, Danny, because Jerry would have gotten word to me somehow if he were alive. Anyhow, he had no reason for running. I was at his ranch when he and Lige and Jud talked over the proof they had gathered that Jerry was innocent. Whiskey was Jerry Devlin's one weakness, Danny. If he got hold of a bottle, it was like him to ride straight to the Drag R ranch and have it out with Jack Bacon. He had his six-shooter when he left me—the gun I'd given him on his last birthday. They didn't give him a chance to use it. They murdered him, Danny, like they murdered Lige. Like they're trying now to hang Jud. Danny, we're not letting them get away with it. I'm going to get a gun from the sheriff and I'll have the nerve to use it if I have to. But first I'm going to risk my reputation by throwing myself at that Drag R ramrod's head!

"I'm going back to town now. You'd better give me a few minutes' head start, then come back to town by another trail. If he sees us together now it might spoil our game. I'm going to work it so that he'll be the one to suggest that you stay at the ranch with me."

Danny gave Norah Devlin more than a half hour's start. Then he entered town from another direction. His hair was still damp from the swim he had taken in Milk River to kill time.

The inquest was over. Danny saw Norah Devlin go into the drug store, clinging to Jack Bacon's arm, and Danny headed for the sheriff's office. He found Ike Niber screwing the black rubber handles on a blue barreled six-shooter that had a pasteboard tag tied to the trigger guard.

"Exhibit A," he grinned faintly, motioning Danny to close the door behind him. "The gun that killed Lige Rogers, has turned out to be more valuable than we figured, son. Norah Devlin dropped in to ask me if I had a .32 or .38 gun she could borrow. This six-shooter was layin' here on my desk.

"She sighted it and picked it up. She was shakin' so I was watchin' for her to drop the gun, and her face was whiter'n an angel's wing. She pointed to a chip that was in one of the grips. Then told me to git a screwdriver and take the grips off. Which I did. And inside the grips was an engraved letterin' that read, 'Happy Birthday to Jerry from Norah.'

"Danny, this is Jerry Devlin's six-shooter!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Danny Changes Partners

NORAH DEVLIN moved to the Jerry Devlin place on Big Warm. Jack Bacon sent Danny over to see that she got along all right.

"You'll have plenty of time to go on round-ups," Bacon told the boy. "The little schoolmarm is scared to stay alone there. She's heard a lot of fool talk about the place bein' haunted or somethin'. It won't do you no harm, button, to put in a good word for me there. She ain't said 'Yes,' but she ain't said 'No.' Hell, there ain't a man in this part of Montana that

kin give a woman what I got to give. There ain't many that know it, but I own a half interest in the Drag R outfit. Some day I'll own the whole smear.

"And listen, button: I'm leavin' Art Caufield at the ranch to run things while I'm on the round-up. If he starts hangin' around Norah Devlin, just let me know. And when he rides over to see her, you just play that ol' game of three's a crowd. Caufield might be plumb fool enough to think he kin beat my time. There's snake blood in Art Caufield!"

Danny knew why Jack Bacon had left Art Caufield at the ranch. The Drag R had just landed a contract to deliver one beef a week at the Deer Gulch Mine. Caufield would do the butchering, and more hides with cut-out brands would be dumped in the reservoir.

That would interfere with Danny's plan to drag the reservoir with the grappling hooks Ike was sending out in the wagon taking Norah's stuff out to the Devlin place. Caufield would be sinking his hides after dark. But Danny said nothing of this new danger to Norah. There was no need to get her scared.

Then Caufield made an unexpected move that had Danny guessing.

The second day he was at the Devlin place, Art Caufield rode over. He talked with Norah for about an hour. When he got ready to go he asked Danny to come to the barn with him.

"How'd you like to make a few extra dollars, kid? All you got to do is fetch the wagon out to wherever I'm butcherin' out in the hills. Help me load the beef in the wagon and you take it to town. You know what's goin' on. You might as well git paid for what you know. I don't trust them ranch hands. It'll be an easy way for you to make a few bucks."

Danny agreed. It was better to stay on the good side of Art Caufield, who did the beef butchering. The law wouldn't be able to touch him for hauling the meat. Caufield would take care of the cut-out brands and the hide.

"We butcher tomorrow. Show up at the ranch about breakfast time," Caufield rode away with a wave of his hat to Norah.

Danny told Norah about it. "Anyhow, I'll know what days he butchers, and that night I'll stay away from the reservoir. And bein' in with him on a crooked deal, he might even open up and talk enough to let somethin' slip. He's big-mouthed when he's got a few drinks. I'll fetch him back a bottle from the saloon at Deer Gulch. I'll tell him the saloonman sent it for a present."

The next day Danny drove the team that was hooked to a light democrat wagon. He found the place in the hills where Caufield had shot and range-butchered a big four-year-old steer. The beef was skinned and quartered, the meat on the fresh hide, when Danny got there. Art Caufield, in his bloody butchering clothes, grinned at him. They loaded the beef in the wagon and pulled a tarp over it.

Danny saw the big hole in the hide on the left side and reckoned that it had been a Diamond T steer. The ears on the head were cut off so that there were no ear-marks to identify it.

"Hit the trail, kid. Fetch me back a quart."

Danny grinned and nodded as he climbed on the wagon seat and took the lines. He was saving himself the price of a bottle of whiskey.

HE WAS back at the ranch before sundown. He gave the bottle to Caufield who met him at the barn. Caufield was shaved and had on a clean shirt and his new boots.

"After supper," he said, pulling the cork in the privacy of the empty barn, "I'll ride over to the Devlin place with you and keep Norah from bein' lonesome for an hour or so. I'd make it right with you,

kid, if you was to plug for me in that direction. Know what I mean?"

"I'll do my best, Art. You shore got it on Jack Bacon for looks. And you look better on a horse."

"Think so? Just remember to tell that to Norah when I ain't around." Caufield winked and grinned.

He took his bottle along, shoving it into one of his fancy, white angora wool-covered saddle pockets. The saddle pockets matched his new white chaps, though the evening was too warm for wool chaps.

Caufield was riding a handsome black bronc that had been in Jud's rough string. The bronc was pretty much gentled but Art Caufield would let on in front of Norah that the horse was about half outlaw. Art was like that. The black had pitched with Jud and was hard to ride. Danny wondered if the bragging cowpuncher could set the black if he did take a notion to break in two.

Danny hoped that he wouldn't have any trouble tonight. Caufield was half-drunk, and he might try to get fresh with Norah Devlin. He was bad-mannered with women and thought he was almighty hard to resist when he was around girls.

Caufield took a few more drinks on the way. He asked Danny a lot of personal questions about Norah that made the boy's blood boil. If Jud or Lige had ever heard Art Caufield talk like that about Norah, they would have beaten him till he wouldn't quit his bunk for a month. But Danny had to stand for it. He had to stay in right with Art Caufield.

"Know what I'm goin' to do tonight, button?" he leered, taking a big drink and corking the bottle. "I'm goin' to beat Bacon's time with the little schoolmarm. I want you to take a long ride for yourself, savvy? Gimme a clear field. I ain't the kind that spends half the season makin' purty speeches. Words don't git a man nowheres. Wimmen like men that are strong and wilful. Cave-man stuff, savvy. Grab 'em and hold 'em. Let 'em holler. When there ain't nobody to hear, they simmer down quick enough. Their yellin' is just a stall, just a part of their female game. A wise feller like me don't take no stock in their yelpin' or their bawlin'. Show me the woman between eight and eighty that don't want to be kissed. Yeh, I'll just take little Norah into a bearhug and when she opens her mouth to holler, I'll block her howlin' with a kiss. It ain't never failed to work for me yet, and it won't tonight. You'll be ridin' off yonder, and there won't be nobody to hear her yappin'." Art Caufield's ugly laugh made Danny want to kill him.

Danny had a gun and Norah had the .38 pistol the sheriff had given her. Between them they could put a bullet or two in this big drunken lady-killer that would stop his nonsense. But that, the boy figured, would be throwing a monkey-wrench into their plans. Art Caufield meant every word that he was saying, and more. He'd heard Art Caufield brag around the ranch and at round-up camps.

At dusk they were five miles from the Devlin place. Caufield, carried away by the sound of his own voice, reached for his bottle. He was drunk enough to be careless. As Caufield twisted, his weight in one stirrup and his head turned away, Danny acted quickly. Swinging his quirt by its wrist loop, he flipped it up under the black bronc's tail.

THE bronc snorted, jumped, dropped its head. Squealing and pitching, it hit the ground in zig-zagging, twisting, crooked jumps. Art Caufield dropped his bottle. He lost his right stirrup and grabbed for the saddle horn. His hat flew off. The fourth jump threw Caufield hard. He lit on his neck and one shoulder and lay motionless. The big black bronc bucked off across the hills, stirrups popping, the white angora saddle pockets flapping for all the world like a pair of white wings.

Danny wanted to laugh and shout at the top of his voice. He reined up and looked down at Caufield. The man lay there, his head bent at an awkward angle. He looked like he was dead, his neck broken. Danny swung to the ground. Caufield's face was peeled raw on one side, dirt-smeared and bleeding. He was breathing. Danny pulled his head straight and fanned him with his hat. He grinned faintly at the man's ruined shirt and at the smashed bottle nearby.

After a time Art Caufield moved, and his bloodshot eyes blinked open. Some color came back into his gray skin. He sat up dazedly, started cussing, his voice thick and unsteady. He cursed Danny for no special reason. Then he realized he was afoot and told Danny to catch "that black, man-killin' snake." Before he was finished talking he was overcome by nausea.

Danny got on his horse and rode off after the loose bronc. He grinned to himself; knowing the bronc would head back for the home ranch after it had bucked itself tired.

Danny was taking his time about fetching back the bronc. He reckoned that Caufield, sick from whiskey and the fall he'd taken, would be all out of the notion of going sparking with a skinned-up face and his fancy shirt half torn off. The lady killer was sure a sorry-looking sight. His bottle was busted and he'd be wanting a big drink or two to straighten himself up.

Danny overtook the bronc after a two-mile race, roping the horse. He was afraid Caufield might take a notion to kill the horse that had piled him, so he rode over to the horse pasture. It took another half hour to rope one of Caufield's string, change the saddle from the black bronc, and get back on the trail.

He found Art Caufield trying to walk back toward the ranch in his new, tight-fitting boots. He now carried his fancy white chaps slung over his shoulder. He cursed Danny for being so damned slow. Cursed him again for fetching a gentle horse instead of the bronc.

"I wanted to drag it outa that black outlaw," he said. "Spur him from foretop to hocks. Jud Austin never could break a horse right. Any damn bronc he ever finished with was spoiled. I'll bust that black snake's treacherous heart. Ride 'im and fan 'im every jump he takes. Rake the guts plumb outa him. It'll be the last time he'll ever throw me!"

But Danny would bet dollars to chalk that Art Caufield would never try to fork the black bronc. Deep in his heart, Caufield was scared of anything but a broke horse.

Caufield's skinned face was oozing blood. Dirt and fine gravel was ground into the raw flesh. He looked sick.

"Miss Norah," said Danny, hiding a grin, "might have some salve to put on your face, Art."

"Miss Norah, hell! I'm goin' back to the ranch. Keep your damn trap shut about me bein' throwed. Even if it was a fool accident. I had my right foot plumb outa the stirrup when that ornery, treacherous hearted, inbred thing come apart. You keep this to yourself, savvy?"

"Shore thing, I will. You know me, Art. I kin be mighty tight-trapped."

Danny rode on to the Devlin place. He told Norah about the incident and they had a good laugh. Then Danny told her that tonight was a good time to get to work at the reservoir. Art Caufield would get drunk and bed down early. She wanted to go with him but he told her that two of them might be noticed, whereas even if somebody did sight him near the ranch he could give Caufield some sort of likely-sounding excuse.

Norah let him go alone, her reluctance giving way to Danny's sound reasoning.

CHAPTER SIX

The Trap Is Sprung

THE round white moon threw a ghostly light over the calm surface of the reservoir. The willows threw weirdly shaped shadows across the moonlit water. On a night like this, Jerry Devlin had been murdered, Danny told himself, and his dead body weighted like a hide and dumped in the water. Dread, cold dread, and something like fear was gripping the boy's heart as he pulled off his boots and clothes, piling them in the shadow of the brush. His horse was hidden down the creek a quarter of a mile.

The grappling hook, a four-pronged iron thing with a rope run through a loop in its short iron shaft, he took with him as he eased himself into the water that seemed cold as ice tonight. He swam around, kicking his legs and moving his arms in a fast-breast stroke to get the chill out of his body. He had not gotten his head and face under water.

There was a dead man's wet, slime-covered body down near the foot of the dam. Since his first thought of Jerry Devlin being there in the water, Danny's vivid imagination had pictured the body. He had never seen a drowned corpse, but he could easily imagine the revolting sight.

His mouth clamped shut, he began to tread water as he let the rope uncoil, lowering the pronged drag hook. He swam to the edge of the dam and grabbed the overhanging branches of the willows with his left hand, holding the rope in his right. He was shivering with cold and nervousness, kicking his legs to keep them from getting numb or cramped. The grappling hook hung to something. He pulled slowly, easily at first. The hooklike, sharp pointed prongs had caught something. Hanging to the willows, he pulled harder, as steadily as he could. It gave way with a jerk that ducked the boy's head under. Spitting, Danny dangled the now empty hook at the end of his saddle rope that he was using and dropped it to the bottom of the reservoir. A slime-covered, blackish snag came to the surface. It gave the boy a ghastly start, because it was the size of a man's arm. He tried to grin as he felt of it gingerly, discovering it was a thick willow stick that the grappling hook had jerked loose from the rip-rapping.

The hook on the bottom had caught something else. He could tell now by the way it caught and held that it was something softer than a willow snag this time. It was something soft enough to give a little as he pulled gently.

It might be one of the sunken hides. He could pull it a foot or two, then it would refuse to give. A body in a sack, weighted with a rock or hunk of iron might act like that.

Long ago, since the notion of grappling for the dead body had come up, Danny had planned over and over his exact method of procedure: To tie the end of the rope to a willow tree on the dam. Then, taking a lung full of air and holding it, he'd go down the rope hand over hand, as he had seen pictures of native divers in a book of the South Seas.

Danny had already picked the trunk of a thick willow. He had just enough rope to tie fast to the tree trunk. The grappling hook was holding the rope taut.

This was the part that he had been dreading. The moonlight on the water, the misshapen shadows thrown by the willows were unreal, ghostly. It took all the nerve he had to go down that rope. He was spooky, and a little sick at the thought of hauling up a dead man. He had to try several times before he could pull enough air into his lungs.

Thinking of Jud and Lige and Norah, he took a deep breath, grabbed the rope, went head first, hand over hand, down into the black depths. Fear gave him the speed and agility now of a monkey. He

was at the end of the rope. His hand felt the short iron shaft of the grappling hook, then it probed with swift, fearful desperation. The hook was caught by two of its four prongs in what felt like burlap sacking. There was a rip in the sacking and under it was either canvas or the smooth side of a hide.

Danny's lungs seemed to be bursting. He let go the rope and propelled himself to the surface. Gasping, panting, spewing water that had somehow gotten into his mouth. He sputtered and choked. His eyes ached.

Then his heart seemed to quit beating. He had blinked the water from his eyes. Riding toward the reservoir and not fifty yards away came the man he knew must be Art Caufield!

DANNY made the dam in a couple of swift, under-water strokes. He found a hand hold in the overhanging willows and clung there, only his head above water, hidden in the black shadows that overhung the bank.

Caufield had a beef hide cut in half and carried in two rolls, thrown in front of him across his saddle horn. He swayed drunkenly in the saddle. He took a drink from his bottle before he dumped the two rolled pieces of hide into the reservoir. When one of them would not sink right away, he threw rocks at it, missing two out of three tries. Finally the hide sank and he got back on his horse. He was swinging his leg across the saddle when the willow limb supporting Danny snapped. It sounded as loud as a pistol shot in the boy's ears.

Art Caufield, drunk as he was, heard the sound. He jerked his gun and peered into the shadows of the willows on the dam, teeth bared in a mirthless grin. Danny had cautiously grabbed hold of another willow and was clinging to it, numb with a bitter chill that seemed to be freezing the blood in his veins.

Caufield, suspicious, muttering, and two thirds drunk, dismounted and prowled through the brush on the dam. Danny, expecting that any second now the man would stumble on his hidden clothes, held his breath, clamping his jaws to keep his teeth from chattering. He drew a breath of relief when he saw Caufield paw his way out of the brush and start back to his horse. Then the man stopped, bent over and picked up something at the water's edge.

Danny's heart jumped into his throat, choking him, so that he could hardly breathe. Danny had used his jack-knife to cut the knot in the end of his saddle rope so that it would go through the loop in the short shaft of the grappling hook. He had left his pearl-handled knife with his ititials scratched on the little metal shield on the knife handle, and Caufield had sighted the open blade shining in the moonlight. He was holding the knife and the severed knot from the end of his saddle rope.

His six-shooter dangling in his right hand, Art Caufield examined the knife and the bit of rope with the knot in the end to keep it from raveling. He stood there for a long moment. Then he snapped the blade shut and shoved the knife and rope end into his pocket. Still gripping his gun he mounted his horse and rode back toward the ranch at a long lope.

Danny, so numb that he could hardly move, managed to swim to the bank and shiver into his clothes. The walk to where his horse was warmed him a little. He mounted and headed for the Devlin place, taking a short cut across the hills, riding hard. Perhaps Caufield had recognized the knife. He might take a notion to ride to the Devlin place to see if Danny was there.

The boy had gotten a good look at Caufield's face, and the man had looked suddenly sobered. He had gotten away from there like a man who was afraid of some-

thing. He had been looking back across his shoulder as he went, coyote like, and with his gun ready for action. Art Caufield was badly scared. And it wasn't just a few beef hides with the brands cut out that was spooking him, either.

NORAH met Danny at the barn. She looked white and there was a worried look in her eyes as she grabbed him and hugged him tightly.

"I can't let you go there alone any more," she said, her voice unsteady. "I can't, Danny. Not even if there was a chance of finding—of finding anything. Jud wouldn't want you to risk it, either. You're a brave boy. The bravest, finest boy on earth, bar none, Danny. And what you're doing means more than Jud or I could tell you. But we're not going to let you risk your life again. Caufield or Bacon would kill you. Promise me that you won't go back there!"

"But I've got to go. I've found something. I left the grappling hook and rope tied under water. I've found something!"

Norah, shuddering, held Danny closer. He felt that he'd said something that was as bad as slapping her in the face. He'd caught himself just in time to keep from blurting that his certainty that he had the sharp prongs of that grappling hook sunk in Jerry Devlin's dead, canvas-wrapped body.

They sat up until nearly daylight, the shades pulled, the lamp turned low, talking in hushed voices. At last Danny turned in. He insisted on going to the barn to sleep.

He had hardly closed his eyes when the sound of shod hoofs outside jerked him awake. He scrambled down the ladder that led to the hayloft.

It was hardly daylight, but he recognized Art Caufield. A shiver ran along the boy's spine and his hand gripped the butt of his six-shooter under his denim jumper.

"You alone, button?" Caufield asked, peering into the dark barn.

"Miss Norah's at the house."

"I know that, you little bonehead. I mean, there's nó men around? Nobody bin here askin' you questions?"

"Nobody. What's up, Art?"

"The stock inspector's snoopin' around. I'm killin' a beef in the big pasture—one of ourn. The hide will have the Drag R brand on it. You saddle up and hightail it to the ranch. Fetch out the wagon. You're takin' a beef to Deer Gulch and a Drag R hide with it. The stock inspector will be there. We'll show that nosey son a trick. He'll look plumb silly when he reads the iron on that hide."

Danny heaved a sigh of relief. Caufield was impatient. "Git movin' there, kid. I'll have the beef ready to load by the time you git out there with the wagon."

Art Caufield had on his blood-smeared butchering overalls pulled over his pants. His scabbed, swollen face had a tense, scared look. He looked over his shoulder toward the house. Norah had heard him ride up and came to the door, a bathrobe over her nightgown, a shotgun in her hands. Art Caufield called out to her.

"I'm borrowin' Danny for an hour or two, Norah!" he shouted.

"It's all right," Danny called to her reassuringly. "I'm helpin' Art out at the ranch. I'll be back by noon, easy."

Danny didn't get a chance to talk to her alone. He rode off with Art Caufield. When they were out of sight, Norah saddled her horse and headed for town at a long trot. There was something about Caufield's manner and his none-too-plausible talk that had roused her suspicions.

Caufield, as he and the boy headed for the ranch, made no mention of the knife and the bit of rope-end. Instead he seemed in an almost gay mood. He kept telling Danny how plumb foolish that stock inspector would look when he read the Drag R brand on the hide.

Caufield left Danny and headed for the big pasture. Danny found the team hooked to the wagon and tied at the hitchrack. He stabled his horse and drove out to the horse pasture. He had no trouble locating Caufield. He had half suspected a trap and had his six-shooter handy, ready to shoot if the man made one false move.

But the beef was quartered and ready to load. They put the four quarters of beef in the wagon. Caufield rolled up the hide and threw it in, then covered it with the big meat tarp.

"Don't stop along the road to pick no loco weed, button. Hit the trail."

Danny drove out by way of the upper gate, hit the wagon road and drove to Deer Gulch. It was only an hour or so past sun-up when he pulled up in front of the big meat house at the Deer Gulch Mine.

Sure enough, the stock inspector, a heavy paunched ex-saloonkeeper who was never quite sober, was waiting there.

There was an unpleasant, one sided grin on Stock Inspector Pete Anderson's red jowled face. "Let's have a look at that hide, sonny. Just fer the hell of it."

He threw back the bloodstained tarp and dragged out the fresh hide, spreading it on the big platform scales. He smoothed the hair on the hide. Then he motioned to the boy.

"How do you read this brand, young feller?" His whiskey-husk voice had an ugly tone.

Danny squatted beside the big stock inspector. His eyes widened as he read the brand. He hadn't troubled to examine the hide before. He stared incredulously now at the unmistakable Half Circle T brand on the hide that Caufield had said was "one of ourn."

"Ever bin in jail, button?" leered the big stock inspector.

Danny shook his head dazedly. "No."

"Well, you'll sleep in the Chinook hoosegow tonight. And I'll just take this. . . ." He yanked the six-shooter from the waistband of Danny's overalls.

"It's Reform School, kid, till you're old enough to be sent to the pen at Deer Lodge. The judge hands it out in fifteen-year chunks for beef-stealin'."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Midnight Showdown

SHERIFF IKE NIBER was not at the jail when the stock inspector delivered his prisoner. The jailer, a little old cowpuncher with a crippled leg, took charge of Danny.

"Lock him up by hisself where he can't talk to anybody," said Pete Anderson. "He's tough. Where's the sheriff?"

"Gone," said the little old jailer testily. He was deaf, and the beefy stock inspector had to bellow to make himself heard.

"I know he's gone, dammit!" he shouted. "Where'd he go?"

"Off somewheres. And don't go a-cussin' me, you beer-paunched politician. Is this all you got to do? Fetchin' in half growed boys. Tough, says you. Put the button in laig irons and handcuff him to the cell bars. Bread and water and solitary. It's a damn wonder, Anderson, you didn't whup him over the head with a gun when you grabbed him. Now clear out. Ike might come back and ketch you here a-lousin' up his jail."

When the stock inspector was gone, the jailer led Danny to the cell where Jud sat on the edge of his bunk working at a puzzle made of horseshoe nails. At sight of Danny he jumped to his feet.

"What's the rip, pardner? What—?"

"Company fer yuh, Jud." The little old jailer grinned and unlocked the door. "In you go, button."

Before Danny could explain how he happened to be in jail, Norah showed up, ushered to the cell door by the little deaf jailer.

"I knew something was going to happen

to you, Danny," she said, her voice tense with alarm. "I came to town to get the sheriff. He's out of town on business. What happened?"

Danny told her and Jud. For Jud's benefit he told all about his experience at the reservoir. When he had finished Jud, holding Norah's hand through the bars, nodded, frowning.

"Caufield wanted you out of the way. He suspected you were after something besides just beef hides. It's my guess that you've spooked him bad, Danny. He and Bacon won't be roundsidin' while you're locked up. It's dollars to doughnuts they'll be draggin' the reservoir tonight. If I was only out of this jail!"

"I've stayed with Ike's wife a hundred times to keep her company while he was gone. I know where he keeps a set of jail keys." Norah's voice was a whisper now. "It's a lowdown trick to play on Ike, but I'm going to do it. I'll slip the keys through the window to you after dark. I'll have your horses ready. I'll have your guns, Jud—"

Jud pulled her close to the bars and kissed her. "Norah, you're braver than the Texas Rangers. Mebbyso this is an ornery trick to pull on Ike, but if we turn lucky he ain't the man to kick. If I've guessed wrong, we'll come back and lock ourselves in jail. Eh, Danny?"

"You'll have to lock me in too!" said Norah. "See you later."

When she had gone, Jud and Danny talked. The jailer fetched their supper and told them he was going up town to sit in a little game of coon-can with the boys. He'd drop around about nine-ten o'clock.

The stars were coming out when they heard a pebble thrown from the outside come through the barred window and drop on the floor. Jud hoisted Danny to the height of the window. He clung to the bars. He could barely make her out in the dark shadows of the jail wall.

"Coast clear, Danny?" she called softly.

"All clear!" he called back. She tossed the ring of keys to him three times before he finally caught them.

"I'll be at Ike's barn with the horses," she called, her voice barely audible. "Meet me there."

Getting out of the jail took but a few minutes. They had turned out their cell light and fixed their bedding to look as if they were asleep in their bunks. Ten minutes later they were at the sheriff's barn. Their saddled horses were waiting and ready. Norah had her own horse saddled.

"I'll ride with you as far as Jerry's place," she told Jud, handing him and Danny each a six-shooter and a couple of boxes of cartridges. There was no dissuading her. The three of them got under way, riding hard, keeping clear of the main road.

DANNY rode ahead, letting them follow. Nor did he look back once to see if they were holding hands. The boy's heart was light, pounding with excitement. Jud was free again! They would be riding together tonight. No more lone-wolf work for Danny.

"I don't like this notion of you stayin' alone," Jud told Norah when they reached the Jerry Devlin place.

"Then take me with you," she challenged.

She finally consented to compromise by not going to the house. She would hide out with her horse below the ranch buildings. Down along the creek where the brush would hide her from the sight of any night-prowling riders from the Drag R ranch. She showed Jud her gun and told him she'd use it in a tight, and he and Danny had to be content with that. They headed for the Drag R reservoir, their horses traveling at a high trot.

They approached the reservoir from the far side. Leaving their horses and creeping up along the creek below the dam,

keeping to the shadows of the brush. Jud went ahead, Danny close at his heels.

Suddenly Jud halted, holding his arm up for Danny to halt. The boy's pulse beat in his ears like a drum. Then he heard what Jud had heard. The low, muffled grunting of a man and brush breaking.

"Stay here!" Jud whispered, then went ahead cautiously.

Danny heard him moving in the darkness ahead. Then came sounds that he could not puzzle out. It seemed hours, but it was actually only a few minutes later when Jud, followed by another man, showed up. The other man was Sheriff Ike Niber!

"Give Ike your gun, Danny. They taken his when they laid for him and knocked him on the head, then tied him up."

Danny gave his gun to the sheriff. They told him to stay where he was. He waited until they were gone, then followed cautiously. Jud or Ike had heard him, however. As he came slipping through the brush, Jud grabbed his shoulder.

"You little ol' sun of a gun," he shook Danny none too roughly. "Don't come no fu'ther, button. They're workin' at the dam. We got to play a waitin' game. Till they drag up Jerry Devlin's dead body, we ain't got a thing on 'em. Me'n Ike will slip up till we kin hear 'em talk. You stay put. Or do I have to hogtie yuh?"

"I'll stay, Jud."

DANNY let them go on ahead. They were lost to sight in the shadows ahead. Danny guessed he was about fifty yards from the dam. He could make out the figure of a man standing near the end of the dam. He heard the sound of oarlocks and splash of oars. The had the old rowboat, used on rare occasions by duck hunters who came out from town.

Danny picked up the catch rope that they had used to tie up the sheriff. He coiled it and carried it in his hand as he moved on ahead a little to watch and hear what went on. Voices came over the water from the rowboat.

"Try about here, Art. And don't move so clumsy or you'll upset the boat. I can't swim a lick." That was Bacon, calling out to the man on the bank.

"Don't go to sleep on the job, Anderson. Keep your eyes peeled. Better slip back and finish that damn sheriff. Me'n Art will drag up what's left of Jerry Devlin directly. Hope he don't stink too bad. Go back and kill that sheriff, Pete. Dead men tell no lies."

"I ain't killin' nobody," growled the whiskey voice of Pete Anderson from the bank. "Murder is your job, Bacon—yourn and Art's. You killed Devlin. You killed Lige Rogers. If you want Ike Niber killed, do the job yourselves. I draw the line at murder!"

"Quit that bellerin', yuh drunken fool! Want the world to hear yuh? Me and Art got Devlin, and we got Lige Rogers. And you pot-gutted son, we'll git you if you don't finish Ike Niber. You're into this, and you'll do your share. . . . Snag anything, Art?"

The rowboat was close to the dam. Art Caufield gave a grunt and yanked on the rope that was fastened to a grappling hook.

"Easy, you drunken bonehead," called Bacon. "You're rockin' the boat. Got a bite?"

"I got somethin', Bacon. Hold the boat steady with the oars. The hook's grabbed somethin'. Hell! It's a rope, tied to the willers on the dam. It's hooked to somethin'! Let's git outa here!"

"Pull in to the shore!" barked Ike Niber. "You just talked your necks into a noose! Come ashore, or—"

There was a loud splash as the boat overturned. Caufield had dived into the black water. Bacon's half-choked yells were hoarse with fear. Bacon was clinging desperately to the overturned boat and yelling for help.

Guns barked. Danny saw the huge bulk of Pete Anderson run, elephant-like, crashing through the brush. He saw Jud running to head off Caufield who had reached the bank. Ike was calling to Bacon to hang onto the boat.

Caufield, cut off from his horse, whirled, his gun spewing flame. Jud's six-shooter spat fire. They stood on the bank and shot it out. Art Caufield went down in a heap. Jud had been shot through the leg and was down on one knee.

Danny listened to the crashing of brush. He saw Pete Anderson break through the brush and crouch, his six-shooter in his hand, waiting to ambush Ike Niber. The big stock inspector was not twenty feet from where Danny, the saddle rope in his hand, was crouching.

Ike was coming as fast as he could fight his way through the brush. Another minute and he'd be through. Then Anderson would kill him as he'd shoot a beef.

Danny worked feverishly, making a loop. The sheriff was making enough noise to drown out the faint whisper of the loop as Danny swung it around his head, then risked everything as he threw it.

The loop dropped over Pete Anderson's head. Danny jerked swiftly, then yanked with all the strength in his arms, throwing his weight at the end of the taut rope that encircled the stock inspector's neck.

Pete Anderson went over backwards and the gun in his hand exploded harmlessly. Queer, choking sounds came from his throat. The big stock inspector's face was black when Ike Niber got there.

Danny grabbed Anderson's gun from where it lay on the ground. He paid no heed to the sheriff's voice warning him back.

DANNY, however, had no need for the gun. Caufield was dead. Jud sat on the ground, his gun covering Bacon whose head and shoulders showed above the water line as he clung to the overturned boat.

"I got a notion," called Jud, "to shoot your hands loose from that boat and let you drown, Bacon."

"Don't, Jud! Don't drown me! Hangin' beats drowndin'. I damn near drownded when I was a kid! Git me ashore. I'll tell it, Jud. So help me Gawd, I'll tell the truth. Me and Art killed Jerry Devlin. He had told us to stay away from his sister, and we wanted his ranch. Then Lige stumbled onto somethin' about us killin' Jerry and dumpin' his carcass in the reservoir. It was me that killed Lige Rogers, Jud. That damn kid Danny suspected us all along. Art was to kill you at the same time I shot Lige. But the light wasn't good and he was scared to risk it. The idee was to make it look like the two of yuh had it in fer each other on account of Norah Devlin and you shot it out. Now will you haul me ashore?"

"I can't swim with a busted laig," said Jud. "Ike don't know how to swim. Looks like you're goin' to drown. Hi, there, Danny. Little pardner, yonder's a yaller-bellied coyote that's howlin' loud. He says he's scared to drown. What do you reckon we'll do about him?"

"Me," said Danny, trying to make his voice as casual as Jud's, "I'd as soon let him drown. But Miss Norah wouldn't like it thataway. Wimmen are squeamish about things, Jud." He pulled off his boots and clothes.

"Haulin' him ashore will be pickin's. I'll swim out and grab the rope that's fastened to the grapplin' hook Caufield was usin'. It's tied to the boat. All I got to do is hang the hook deep in Bacon's hide and swim ashore with the rope. You and me and Ike kin haul him ashore before he swallers more than half the lake. But Jud, I'm takin' my last swim in the reservoir."

"That goes for me likewise, pardner."

Danny swam out to the boat. It took a few minutes to get the rope untied from

the boat. He fastened the hook to the rope he had anchored to the willows.

"So that when we haul you ashore, Bacon," he said, swimming like a muskrat between the dam and the boat, "we'll be haulin' in what's left of pore Jerry Devlin. Grab the rope and hang on. I'll swim ashore with the other end."

Ike was tying up Jud's leg when Danny swam ashore with the end of the rope. They joshed him and their hoorawing brought a warmth to his shivering body.

They hauled Bacon and the grisly, tarpaulin-wrapped corpse of Jerry Devlin ashore.

Sheriff Ike Niber took charge of the two prisoners. He tugged at his drooping moustache, his eyes twinkling.

"If all escaped prisoners come in as handy as you two, I'd leave the jail key on a string where they could reach it easy. Send a wagon from the Drag R ranch. You can't ride with that leg, Jud."

"I'll make it to the Devlin place, with Danny's help. The Doc will find me there. And Ike, if there's an old deputy badge in your office, I know a shirt to pin it on. Danny's always wanted one since he was knee high to a horned toad."

"He gits a brand new deputy sheriff's badge," said Ike, "with his name, Danny Walsh, engraved on the back. "He'll git sworn in legal and proper."

As Jud and Danny headed for the Devlin place they were both thinking of Lige Rogers.

"Lige and Jerry's up yonder where the stars shine, pardner," said Jud. "I bet they're shore proud of you, feller. You done a he-man's job and no mistake. Caufield's dead. Bacon will hang, but I'd be hangin' if it wasn't for you. I don't need to tell you I've done taken my last drink of booze.

"There's money in the bank that me and Lige put in trust for you. Norah wants to live on Jerry's place after we're married. Suppose we buy cattle with your money and stock that range—Norah and you and me? That would suit Jerry Devlin, and it's what Lige would want, I reckon. You're goin' to be best man at the weddin'. And you'll be ramroddin' your own spread. Norah will tend to your book-learnin' and build apple pies. And I ain't too proud to swing a hay fork or dig post holes. Stout in the back and willin', that's me. Yonder's her light in the cabin. She's waitin' for us."

"Lope on ahead, Jud. I'll foller."

When Jud had gone on, Danny looked up at the stars. His eyes were bright with unshed tears, his voice a soft, hoarse whisper.

"I got the job done, Lige. Like I promised. Amen."

THE END

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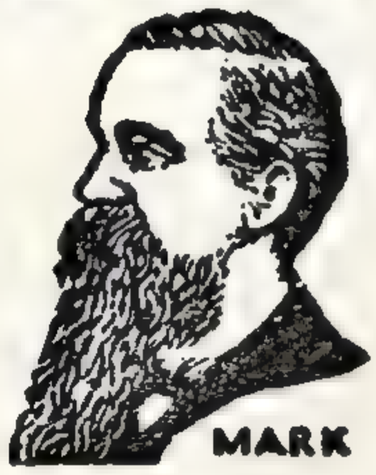

Rusty Badge--Ready Gun!

By Norman A. Fox

They said that old Sheriff Whitney was getting rusty; that he was too stove-up for his job. But the grizzled lawman had another idea when he tragically discovered that his medico son was riding with the toughest renegades who ever looted a rich cowtown bank!

SHADOWS were weaving a striped pattern across Elkhorn's main street but the weight of worry blinded Sheriff Harv Whitney to the coming of night.

Seated in his little office, he was lost in a tangle of thoughts, all of them unpleasant. Ring Scarbo, the swaggering owner of the Nugget Saloon had crowded his mind, but mostly he had been thinking of young Doctor Sam Whitney, his son, who was somehow mixed in the meshwork of lawlessness that enshrouded Scarbo. Someday, soon, Harv Whitney might have to arrest Doc. Things looked bad.

Only recently, old Banty Murch who ran the livery stable had spoken a piece. "I ain't makin' no accusations," Banty had said. "I'm jest tellin' yuh what folks is sayin'. Doc's been seen plenty of'en with this tinhorn, Fran Curry. And Doc has his hoss out of the stable nearly every night. They ain't *that* much sickness in the Elkhorn country!"

Harv Whitney was an old man and that sort of talk was making him show the weight of his years. Lately, his gaunt frame had become leaner, his craggy face

Shoulder to shoulder, the Whitneys and Fran Curry fought their battle. . . .

sterner; outward indications of the torturing suspicions that festered within him. Today he had sent for Doc because of those suspicions. And Doc was coming. Through the window he glimpsed his son far down the street.

IT was easy to see Doc Whitney. Doc was over six foot and he had a bulk to his shoulders that made people overlook the boyishness of his face. Studying him from afar, it came to the sheriff that he and Doc had grown a long ways apart in recent years. And he wondered what he was going to say to his son—and how he was going to say it.

Then Doc Whitney, a black-clad figure, was standing in the doorway, smiling easily. "You wanted to see me?" he asked.

Harv Whitney grunted, indicated a chair. A way of beginning suddenly occurred to him and he fumbled among the papers littering his desk and found a letter. He extended it wordlessly.

The letter was from the Governor of Montana. Doc's smile faded and he whistled softly as he began to read. And Harv, who knew the letter by heart, followed mentally.

Dear Sir:

It is my duty to inform you that I have received a number of letters from prominent citizens of Elkhorn which indicate they are dissatisfied with your methods of conducting your office.

It appears to be a general belief that your age has rendered you incapable of adequately coping with the present lawlessness resulting from the discovery of gold in your section. I have been urged to use my authority to suspend you and name a substitute until the next county election.

In view of your years of service, I naturally hesitate to take such a drastic step unless no other alternative remains. It is my hope that your future actions will prove this unnecessary.

Beneath the governor's signature was a postscript scrawled in the same hand:

Had to write this letter to satisfy the mossbacks that've been hollering about you, Harv. Reckon you'll have Elkhorn cleaned up pronto.

Doc Whitney frowned, returned the letter. "Looks like the governor's playing both ends against the middle," he pointed.

"The gent that's governor was my saddlemate before yuh was born," Harv Whitney said. "He's givin' me my chance to do my chores."

"Anything I can do to help?" Doc asked.

"Nothing," Harv said abruptly and cleared his throat. Words had to come and he began valiantly. "I've lawed this county for close to forty years, son," he said. "'Fore that, my dad was a peace officer down in the Nations. The Whitneys has rode the law trail for a mighty long spell. It was my idea, once, that maybe yuh. . ."

"I know," Doc said soberly. "You thought I'd be taking your badge. We talked that out before I went to medical school. My trail's different, Dad. Nothing can change that."

"I ain't arguin' that point," Harv conceded. "I couldn't savvy why you'd rather pound pills than do my kind of work. Finally I got so's I could stomach the notion. But now—"

"But now—" Doc prompted.

Harv Whitney's blue eyes avoided his son's. "A couple of nights ago I asked yuh to ride with me to see about a killin' at the diggings," he reminded. "Yuh said Rick Bogart's wife was having a baby and yuh had to go to Rick's ranch. I sent a gent out to that spread next day, Sam. Yuh hadn't been near the place for two weeks!"

The words hit. They drained the color from the younger man's face and Harv paused. But Doc didn't speak.

"Yuh stick closer to Fran Curry than a saddle sticks to a hoss, son," the sheriff continued relentlessly. "Yuh been drinkin' and gamblin' down at Ring Scarbo's Nugget. I'm thinkin' Scarbo's behind the robbings and shootin's here and at the diggings—and Fran Curry is his right bower."

"So—"

"Outlaws get in gun scrapes and pay well for doctorin'," Harv went on. "Yuh do a lot of night ridin', son. Folks hereabouts think yuh're doin' that doctorin'."

"I generally doctor whoever needs me," Doc Whitney said evenly.

"That's why I sent for yuh. Yore trail's different than mine, like yuh said. But doctorin' outlaws is aidin' and abettin' 'em. I'm cleaning up Elkhorn pronto. I'm gonna be sorry as hell if our trails cross."

Doc's face was a mask. "I savvy," he said softly, and fumbled with his sombrero. "Is that all you've got to say, Dad?"

Harv Whitney nodded mutely. When he looked up Doc was gone. Slumping deeper in his chair, the sheriff studied the yawning doorway with unseeing eyes. He had wanted Doc to tell him he was mistaken. At the very least, he had hoped Doc would snort in anger and stamp away from the office. But Doc had only asked, "Is that all you've got to say?" and left. And by that very action, Doc stood guilty in the eyes of Harv Whitney.

GUILTY! Faced by the confirmation of his suspicions, Harv wondered if he could truly blame his son. The badge on Harv's vest represented his life's work but that badge had kept him mighty busy. Maybe he'd been too busy to spend much time with Doc during the boy's formative years. If that was true, who, then, was guilty because Doc had been denied the steadying influence of a father's understanding and had gone wrong.

But, regardless, Elkhorn had to be cleaned up—and soon. Harv Whitney had stalled at first in order to investigate, to uncover the man behind the outlawry. And because of his apparent inactivity a lot of gents had presumed he was getting too old for his office! It had been a month since the governor had written. Since then, Harv had held his hand because of the rumors about Doc. Now his course lay clear before him.

A desire for action suddenly burned within him; a means of escape from his torturing thoughts. Jamming a sombrero on his graying head, he left the office. Once on the street his steps were sure and they led him toward the lavish building that was Ring Scarbo's Nugget Saloon.

Elkhorn was pulsing with life. Booted miners thudded along the board walks and Harv Whitney shouldered among them and felt alien. Gold had changed a cowtown to a mining camp. And Harv remembered, without rancor, the gents who had written the governor. They must have been old-timers like himself, folks who longed for Elkhorn's quiet yesterdays. They wanted law, those old-timers. And they would get it, Harv reflected bitterly, and winced as he thought of the terrifying form duty might take.

The Nugget was packed when he pushed through the batwing doors. Miners and cowmen danced with painted percentage girls, their shuffling feet drowning the whir of roulette wheels, the clink of glasses along the crowded L-shaped bar.

Fran Curry lounged near the door and at sight of him Harv unconsciously brushed the bone-handled forty-five at his thigh. Curry was a tall man, almost as tall as the Whitneys, and he had an expressionless, baffling face. He was new to Elkhorn, coming since the advent of Ring Scarbo, but Harv had learned to hate him quickly. From the first Fran Curry had seemed to be able to influence Doc.

But Harv couldn't be concerned with Curry tonight. It was Scarbo, himself, he intended to see and he elbowed through the crowd and shoved into Scarbo's private office without knocking.

Ring Scarbo sat before a fancy desk, filling an ornate chair to overflowing. He had a moon-face that appeared jovial at first glance, but his eyes were too small, his lips too thin, to confirm the impression. He showed no surprise as he recognized his visitor.

"Sit, Sheriff," he boomed. "What's on your mind?"

Thumbs hooked in cartridge belt, Harv paused in the doorway and studied the man who had become a ruthless power in Elkhorn. He had traced a lot of things, unpleasant things, to Scarbo's door.

"What I got to say will be said quick," Harv snapped, "and I'll say it standin'. I'm givin' yuh just twenty-four hours to get out of Elkhorn. Reckon yuh savvy why."

Scarbo's eyes narrowed. "You do business fast—when you get started," he remarked. "It's mighty short notice."

"Twenty-four hours," Harv repeated and left the room.

He paused at the bar afterwards, apparently to sip a beer but actually to inventory the strength of Ring Scarbo.

Four tied-gun hombres were posted about the room. Harv eyed them speculatively then left the saloon and headed back to the jail-building where he usually slept. The die had been cast.

Halfway between the Nugget and the jail was a section of the main street that was deserted by night. Banty Murch's livery stable loomed at Harv's left and across the way was the postoffice. It was a region of shadows, strangely peaceful, and its very quiet reminded Harv that Ring Scarbo might try to strike at him before the twenty-four hours were up. But Harv wasn't prepared for what happened.

THE airlash of a bullet tugged at his sombrero and flame speared from the neighborhood of the postoffice. Diving for cover, Harv jerked at his gun with the movement, fired. Death winked again from the shadows but between shots Harv thought he heard the thud of retreating feet. There was still a murky form across the way, and peering, Harv recognized it. He released his wrath with the bullet and saw a man crumble.

Ears straining Harv Whitney waited. Finally he crossed the street. A man writhed in pain, one leg twisted grotesquely beneath him. The fellow clutched a gun but Harv kicked it aside, cupped a match and bent closer. Savage satisfaction rioted through him as he confirmed the man's identity. It was Fran Curry.

"Scarbo rated me high," Harv gritted. "Two bushwhackers—and one of 'em his top hand."

Curry only swore. Men had begun to gather, a questioning throng, and Harv appealed to them. "This gent stays at the hotel," he said. "Some of yuh help me pack him down there. We'll patch him up—then move him to jail."

Ready hands fastened on Fran Curry and they carried the moaning gambler to the hotel, stretched him upon the bed in his room and then Doc Whitney edged through the crowd at the doorway, his black case beneath his arm.

"Just heard," he said briefly. "Somebody told me you wanted a doctor up here."

Harv nodded, jerked a thumb toward Curry. He wondered how much Doc had heard and what Doc thought of Fran Curry now. But his son was all medico at the moment. Closing the door on the curious, Doc began his examination. Within a few minutes he straightened, turned to his father.

"His knee's shattered," Doc reported. "He'll have to stay here tonight, at least.

He positively can't be moved the way he is."

Harv muttered, left the room without a word. His son was a doctor—but had Doc spoken only in a professional capacity? Harv wanted, with all his being, to believe so, but he couldn't be sure. So before he went to his quarters he looked for a gangling youngster whom he found at one of the saloons. Harv never kept a regular deputy but this boy sometimes did odd chores for him. He took the youngster aside, spoke swift words.

"—So yuh get yoreself up to the hotel and plant yore carcass downstairs," he concluded. "Call me pronto if anybody tries to pack Curry out of there."

Then Harv Whitney went to bed. He had taken precautions to guard his prisoner—and by doing so he had admitted that he doubted Doc's word. It was hell not to be able to trust his own boy and the thought of it kept sleep from him for a long time.

He had drifted to sleep when a fist pounded against the door later. Shaking his head, Harv saw the rosy fingers of dawn prying beneath the drawn shade.

His unofficial deputy was waiting at the door. "He's gone!" the youngster said and Harv knew what he meant. "Somebody bent a hog-leg over my head an hour or so ago. I'm—I'm sorry as hell, Sheriff."

Harv cursed. "Reckon yuh couldn't help it," he said at last. "Better get yoreself some sleep."

Afterwards Harv Whitney went to the hotel although he knew the trip would be fruitless. Fran Curry was gone. Undoubtedly he had been moved out of the town. But Harv didn't feel up to the task of combing the hills in search of him this day.

Instead, he returned to his office and tried to think things out but every thought was like a knife twisting inside of him. Curry had undoubtedly tried to bush-

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whack him at Ring Scarbo's orders, so Scarbo must have engineered the escape. But Doc—? Had Doc been acting under orders when he had said Curry couldn't be moved?

Only Doc could answer that question but his father did not seek him out to ask him. Doc would know he was under suspicion. The least his son could do would be to come and try to clear himself.

BUT Doc did not show up. Through the long hours Harv Whitney brooded in his office, leaving only at noontime for a meal he scarcely touched. And, later, when the purple heralds of night crept into his office he woke to their coming with a start. The hour was nearing when he had threatened to drive Ring Scarbo from Elkhorn.

The shadows thickened, became an all-enveloping cloak. Sheriff Harv Whitney looked to his gun, donned his sombrero. For a moment he paused, a gaunt, gray old man who had a job to do and was about to do it. Then he started for the Nugget Saloon.

It might have been twenty-four minutes rather than as many hours since he had been in the saloon. Again the place was packed and the four gunmen, sullen-eyed and silent, still stood at their posts. And when Harv thrust himself into the office, Scarbo sat at his desk as though he had never left it.

"I gave yuh yore time," Harv said without prelude. "It 'pears yuh'd rather go to jail."

Ring Scarbo smiled and kicked a chair forward. And Harv Whitney who had been prepared for violence knew a stab of uncertainty as he read the smug satisfaction on the saloonman's moon face.

"Sit down, Sheriff," Scarbo invited. "If this is the end of the play, let's face our cards."

Harv ignored the chair. "Jest what are yuh driving at?" he demanded.

"You've heard the talk around town," Scarbo pointed. "I'm just wondering if you're including your boy in the clean-up."

Harv Whitney stiffened. "Shore I've heard talk," he admitted. "I can't arrest a man on account of talk. But I got moren' gab to make me believe Elkhorn will be a better place with you gone—or in jail."

Ring Scarbo leaned closer, his little eyes glittering. "Alright, Sheriff," he said. "Maybe you can run me out—and maybe you can't. Me, I'm a gambling man, Whitney. I'll gamble with you. And if you're playing square, I won't buck you."

"Meanin' what?"

"Meaning that your son's in as deep as anybody. Fran Curry left town last night. 'Pears Doc went with him. Now I'm betting you know just about where Doc would take Curry."

"Do yuh know?" Harv countered.

"Sure I know," Scarbo said mockingly. "You do, too. But you didn't ride out there today to make an arrest."

Here was proof, damning proof, that Doc had had a hand in last night's deal. Ring Scarbo knew all about it. And, sorting Scarbo's words, Harv Whitney suddenly knew just where Doc and Curry had gone. There was a line shack on the ranch Harv had leased out a few years before when his duties as sheriff had finally forced him to move to town. Doc sometimes used the line shack when sick calls kept him out on the range.

"It ain't too late to arrest the pair of 'em," Harv said slowly.

"I'm a gambling man," Scarbo repeated. "I don't want Fran Curry jailed and I'm gambling you won't go after him on account of the gent you'll find with him. But if you was to jail Doc Whitney, I'd know how you stood." He paused, shrugged. "But if you ain't anxious to make a *complete* cleanup, let's talk busi-

ness. The Nugget shows a good profit and I've got the dinero—"

Something in Harv Whitney's eyes must have stopped him, for that same something was an urge to drive a bony fist into the saloonman's moon face. Harv's competence had been questioned these past few weeks but no one had ever questioned his honesty. Did Scarbo have a right to doubt it? And others? Would they say, tomorrow, that Harv Whitney hadn't hesitated about arresting Scarbo but he hadn't been in any hurry to arrest Fran Curry—and Doc.

"I savvy," Harv snorted. "Yuh think I'm playin' favorites. Well, Fran Curry will be in jail by midnight—and so will Doc, if he's with him. Then I'll be back and we'll finish our talk!"

He stamped angrily from the saloon, got his horse from the livery stable. A few minutes later he was heading for the murky bulk of the hills. Yesterday he had intended to banish Scarbo from Elkhorn, content that the man's organized outlawry would crumble with his departure. Now he was going to start packing the jail. First there would be Fran Curry and Doc—and then Scarbo. Harv Whitney was going to show Ring Scarbo —and all of Elkhorn—how a lawman went about making a cleanup.

HE thundered along at a reckless pace, riding blindly, his mind clouded by a burning rage that was renewed whenever he thought of Scarbo's attempted bribery. But as the miles slid behind, his rage gradually dissolved and in its place came something akin to panic, something that left him weak and trembling.

A rising moon drenched the rangeland with silver mist and he saw the trail dipping into a boulder-clogged coulee. The line shack was at the end of the coulee. And the nearness of his destination was bringing a full realization of what he was about to do.

Doc would be at the shack and he would arrest him, drag him back to jail. And, thinking of that, Harv remembered his son as a bare-legged button, riding half-broken cayuses over these same hills. He remembered a dozen forgotten phases of his son's boyhood and they were, suddenly, cherished memories. He even forgot the bitterness that had been his when Doc had announced he was going to medical school.

That had been a blow, at the time. He had always presumed that someday Doc would be sheriff of Elkhorn but Doc had preferred a different trail. And what a strange and terrible turn that trail had taken! Now that their trails were about to cross, Harv Whitney knew that it didn't matter that Doc had chosen to be a doctor rather than a lawman. That was a trivial nothing now that Doc had also become an outlaw.

The coulee was widening and the shack squatted ahead, light streaming from its windows. Checking his horse, Harv sat his saddle, fighting a last silent battle. For the first time he was questioning his duty to his badge, questioning his duty to those old-timers who wanted law in Elkhorn. But he had served his badge too long. He had learned, among other things, that the law was bigger than any man—bigger than himself, bigger than Doc. He dismounted quietly, palmed his gun and, creeping to the door, flung it open.

A kerosene lamp lighted the little room. A table, chairs, a stove and a bunk made up the furnishings. Fran Curry was stretched upon the bunk, his face chalky and pain-etched. Beside the wounded man sat Doc Whitney, and Doc kicked his chair over as he came to his feet. "Dad!" he choked.

"Yes," said Harv monotonously. "It's me. And seein' as how yore patient was able to ride out here, he'll be able to ride back. Yuh'll—yuh'll have to come along, son."

Doc nodded mutely, bowed his head. Once again he had nothing to say but this time his very silence wrung a cry from his father's heart.

"Yuh chose yore trail, son," Harv blurted. "I can savvy how yuh might have got steered wrong. I could even forgive yuh for it, even if the law couldn't. But it hurts like hell, son, to find yuh sidin' the snake that tried to shoot me last night. I'm still yore dad, Sam."

Doc Whitney raised pain-stricken eyes. "Could you maybe take my word, Dad, that you're making a mistake?" he asked.

"No," said Harv Whitney. "I couldn't."

Then Fran Curry spoke. "Tell him," he said to Doc. "Tell him—or I will."

Doc looked hesitantly at Curry. "Alright," he said, and his eyes met his father's. "I brought Curry out here because, with him bad wounded, Ring Scarbo would have found a way to kill him before morning."

"Kill him?" Harv echoed.

"Fran's a lawman, a special officer," Doc announced, low-voiced. "The Governor sent him down here to help you law Elkhorn. He and I have been riding together for weeks, piling up evidence against Ring Scarbo."

"The Governor sets a heap of store in you, Whitney," Fran Curry spoke up. "He made me promise not to tip my hand to you until I had to. Said you was a salty gent who wouldn't like the idea of his butting in."

"But last night," Harv gasped. "That shootin'?"

"Fran wasn't gunnin' for you," Doc explained. "He heard Scarbo send a gunnie after you, so he tailed the hombre. That's why I had to move him out of Elkhorn. When Fran took a shot at Ring's gunnie, he told Ring how he really stood."

HARV WHITNEY sagged against the wall, his head whirling, but one thought pounded like a savage drum of joy. Doc was in the clear! Doc had been siding him all along! A that moment it didn't even matter one damn that the governor had thought Harv was a mite too old to clean up Elkhorn. Harv forgave his old saddlemate for that thought as his resentment was drowned by his happiness.

Then a new fear speared the sheriff. Why had Scarbo goaded him into arresting this pair? Surely Scarbo, knowing that Curry was playing a game of his own, would also know that Curry would tip his true hand to the sheriff.

And, suddenly, Sheriff Harv Whitney knew the answer and the knowledge jerked him into action. With one swift motion he doused the light and at the same moment he heard a hoof strike against rock outside. Instantly Harv was at the window, his gun barrel poking out the pane.

"That's far enough, Scarbo," Harv gritted and fired.

For Scarbo was out there—Scarbo and his four gunnies. Scarbo hadn't known where Doc had taken Curry but the moon-faced man had gambled that Harv Whitney, blind to Curry's true status, might be able to lead him to Doc's hideout. And Harv had. Truly, Ring Scarbo, the gambling man, had gambled—and almost won. For Scarbo had nearly surprised the three men who stood between him and his sway over Elkhorn.

OUTLAW guns were churning the night with deadly flame. Harv fired again, saw a rider spill from his saddle. Scarbo hadn't caught his foe unawares, but he had them penned within the shack and it was plain he intended to smoke them out. His cursing gunnies spread out, became elusive shadows in the flame-stabbed darkness.

But Harv Whitney had fought shadows before and this time he knew he wasn't shooting at the wrong man. His gun

bucked again and again and other guns began to bark beside it. Turning, he saw Doc Whitney earing back a hammer, and Fran Curry, wounded though he was, triggering a rifle. Harv grinned once, ruefully, then, shoulder to shoulder, the Whitneys and Curry fought their battle.

The shack's walls were flimsy and Harv felt bullets nip him. But he was compensated for his hurts when Ring Scarbo rose from behind a rock to fire and Whitney lead broke the saloonman in the middle.

It was the beginning of the end. After that the firing was desultory and finally there was a wild scramble and two horsemen thundered away—the last of the attackers. It took a long minute for Harv to grasp that the fight was over.

Doc had been wounded too, he discovered. Side by side the Whitneys swayed out of the door into a silence that was more explosive than the battle had been. Fran Curry managed to hobble out and join them and, together, the three gazed into the sightless eyes of Ring Scarbo.

"Scarbo's dead and his hellions have already began to desert," Curry said. "I'll stay out here tonight but tomorrow I'll be heading for Helena. I'll tell the Governor that Elkhorn's got all the law it needs. . ."

Afterwards the Whitneys left him, and father and son followed the trail that snaked across the rangeland like a silver ribbon. They rode side by side, and they rode in silence. At parting Harv Whitney had told Fran Curry that he was sorry about wounding him and now there were a lot of things Harv wanted to say, had to say, to his son but he was dumb with a great joy—and a burning shame. But when the trail forked, one branch leading away from Elkhorn, Doc Whitney reined short.

"I'll be riding the other way," he said, and smiled. "Rick Bogart's wife is *really* having her baby tonight."

And then Harv found the words he wanted to say and they welled in his throat, a choking torrent. But first one gaunt hand went forward, an uncertain gesture. "That's yore trail, son," he said. "Ride it. And I'm hoping someday you'll find it in your heart to forgive an old, blind fool who couldn't savvy that a Whitney could pound pills—and still ride the law trail."

But the warm grip of Doc Whitney's hand told the sheriff that his son did savvy. It was a wordless pact that left nothing unsaid. Afterwards Sheriff Harv Whitney sat his horse and watched his son gallop into the moon-sprayed distance. Then he goaded his mount along his own trail, the trail that led to Elkhorn's jail. And somehow, strangely enough, it seemed that his son still rode at his side.

HELL IN BOTH

It was a grim game of hide-and-seek between weary, desperate men. . . .

It seemed innocent enough, that $5,000 Dane Ralston carried in his saddlebags all the way from Gila Bend, so that a friend of his boss' might not suffer. Yet that folding money baited as sure a hangnoose trap as ever swung from a cottonwood—with the boss' friend, and the girl Dane loved, to decoy him into it!

CHAPTER ONE

Try Our Hangnoose, Stranger!

DANE RALSTON rode slowly, a smile on his lips. Eight hundred miles from the Gila River, in Arizona, a thousand miles as he had ridden it, Dane drank in the everchanging vista before him. Every mile of the way had been an adventure, with the high peaks of the Rockies pacing him on the left, the limitless prairie stretching away to his right. And now here were the lush Wyoming rangelands. His long ride was about done.

Dane loped easily up a trough between two low ranges of jackpine-studded hills. The thin echo of a shot sounded and Dane drew rein, frowning. Up yonder, on the

SADDLE BAGS!

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

Smashing cow-country novelette

ridgeback, a lone rider stood in his stirrups, waving his hat.

At first Dane was tempted to answer what he believed to be a hail. Then he knew the man was signalling. As he puzzled, the Arizonian was startled by the sudden appearance of a compact body of riders debouching around a point of the hills and bearing down upon him at a high gallop. The thunder of their hoofbeats grew and their guns glittered in the sunlight—guns held stiffly at ready. All were well mounted. Their ponies showed signs of hard travel.

THE riders, grim faced youngsters for the most part, swept up to him, encircled him with leveled guns. A rawboned

man, with seamed face, long mustache and a piercing eye, rode up to Dane. His voice was harsh with strain.

"Where you headin', young feller?"

"Just travelin'," grinned the man from Arizona.

"Not for yore health, I betcha," growled the man. "Who are you an' where you from?"

"Name uh Dane Ralston, from Gila Bend—in Arizona."

"He's lyin', Sheriff!" flung from the lips of a slender, dark-faced man with a cropped mustache. "I can see it in his eyes. He mighta been in Arizona once, but his business is owlhootin' an' you can't tell me different. This gent's a hard-case if ever I saw one."

The sheriff gave him a frowning glance. "Shut up, Blaze Kimbro. I'll handle this—"

"Like you handled the Metectse Kid," put in a bull-necked, red-faced man, snarlingly. "Had him right in your paws an' let him slip out because you was too stubborn to take advice."

"When I want advice from you, Con Turple, from Blaze Kimbro or any other man, I'll holler. Now shut up an' let me alone." The sheriff's eyes came back to Dane. "If you're travelin', where'd you spend the night, last night?"

"Little town of Dry Coulee," said Dane. "In the Prairie House."

The lawman's lips pursed. "There is a Prairie House in Dry Coulee, but you might not have seen it in a month. I ain't got time to check on that. What's in that rolled slicker behind yore cantle?"

"My plunder," said Dane, and there was a new stiffness in his voice.

"Plunder, he says," laughed Blaze Kimbro, nastily. "I'll say plunder."

"Go through his stuff, Bunny," ordered the sheriff, and a pinch-faced cowboy dismounted and came to Dane's stirrup. The man from Arizona turned cold inside. For one flaming moment, his every impulse was to jerk his weapon and make a fight of it. But at least a dozen gun muzzles bore unwaveringly upon him. He'd never get his hogleg out of its leather.

A hundred disconnected thoughts flooded his mind. What would these men do when they found the five thousand dollars in his saddlebags—the money he had carried a thousand miles northward to a friend of his boss', in Wyoming. He recalled the serious face of his boss when he had handed him the money.

"Dane," he had said. "I wouldn't trust everybody with this much mazuma, even if I was sure they were honest. But Old Martin Pierce used to be my pardner, up in the Shoshone Valley, in Wyoming, an' he's in trouble—what, I dunno. If he don't get this money by September first, he'll go belly up. So I'm lookin' to you to get it to him before that time. Deliver it to Martin Pierce personal, in Shoshone. City. An' plumb on the quiet. He's warned me that nobody must know, nobody but him. I don't know what yo're up against an' neither will you. So don't trust nobody too far; watch for gents who may be layin' for this to happen an' fight like hell if yo're jumped. Good luck, kid; wish I could go along with you."

That's how Old D. L. Truett had trusted him, and now these riders were going to find the money. In case they were not a posse, as they seemed—

THE one called Bunny had unrolled the slicker, carefully examining the personal effects inside. And now he was lifting out those neatly wrapped packages from the saddlebags.

"Oh-oh," he chortled, feeling one of the bundles. "This has all the earmarks, Deacon." Swiftly he broke the string, ripped off the wrapping and revealed the piles of long green bank notes. A low muttering swept the horsemen and their guns seemed to jut closer to Dane Ralston. The sheriff's eyes widened.

"Just travelin', eh?" he sneered. "But not fast enough to get away with the loot, eh? Count it, Bunny. Lord, but this is a piece of luck."

"Somewheres about five thousand dollars, Deacon." From Bunny.

"That all?"

"That's the size of it."

"You sure?"

"Plumb." Bunny's hands were busy going through Dane's clothes and he was lifting his gun from its scabbard. "All but a little small change."

"Where's the rest of it?" demanded the lawman.

"That's all there is an' there ain't no more," snapped Dane, peevishly. "You gents are crazy—"

"Like a fox," broke in the sheriff. "Here, Bunny, dab these come-alongs onto his wrists an' put my loop around his neck."

"Then we can string him to the nearest cottonwood," hollered Blaze Kimbro, wetting his lips. "After lookin' at the riddled corp' of Obadiah Capps—the mustanger, I'm prime for a good hang party. This hombre's gonna swing."

Icy fingers took hold of Dane's heart, squeezing the blood from it as more than half the others cried out for summary vengeance.

"You gents are making a big mistake," he cried desperately. "I don't know what you're talking about, but—"

"Don't eh?" gruffed the sheriff, acridly. "I suppose you never seen the Shoshone-Sheridan Stage?"

"You suppose right; I never did."

"An' I suppose you an' yore pards didn't shoot Ol' Oby Capps down in cold blood an' take the specie shipment an' green money consigned to the Shoshone Bank?"

"I ain't got no pards an' I never shot a man in my life. This money's been in my saddle bags since I left Arizona, more'n five weeks ago."

"A likely yarn," said the sheriff. "Where'd a kid like you get that much money, punchin' cows or sheerin' sheep?"

"I got it from my boss an'—"

"What we doin', Deacon?" demanded Con Turple. "Hangin' him or augerin' with him?"

"You ain't doin' nothin' with him, Turple. If this gent hangs, the judge will sentence him. I'm takin' him into Shoshone City. Newmire, you'll lead the boys, in my absence. Scatter out an' cut for sign of the rest of that murderin' crew. If you don't pick up their tracks, you might try Dry Coulee, just in case they divided the loot there an' split up."

THERE was some argument against the sheriff's purpose, but the hard headed official had his way in the end, riding away driving Dane before him, his hands cuffed behind his back and the sheriff's rope around his neck.

A number of times during the next hour, the lawman spurred his mount alongside Dane's, his eyes gleaming and his face twisted with the promptings of curiosity. An equal number of times he opened his mouth to speak, closed it again as if fearful to voice what was in his mind and then dropped back to the rope's length. The last time he drew abreast, determination was written large upon his rugged face.

"You say you came all the way from Gila Bend?" he began.

"Yes sir."

"An' that this money yo're carryin' was given you by yore boss?"

"That's right."

"Why'd he give it to you?" The sheriff's tone throbbed with eagerness.

Dane faced him squarely. "That's my business an' the business of my boss," he said wearily. "But, seein' the fix I'm in, I can't be blamed for tellin' the truth. If you'll agree to tell no one what I'm goin' to tell you, until I've had time to talk to a

certain man, I'll make a clean breast of my business here.

"Who's the man you want to see?"

"A man name of Martin Pierce, in Shoshone City."

The lawman flinched as if he had been struck. "I give you my word," he said, "that I'll respect as confidential whatever you tell me."

And no sooner had he spoken the words than he did flinch from a blow. Dane heard the impact against his middle and the wind pushed gustingly from his lungs. He saw the man double, saw his face distort in sudden pain and the warm light fade to chill condemnation in his eyes. He gasped, "You dirty, lyin' crook. Yore pards have shot me." Then his eyes had gone blank; he reeled dizzily, clung to his saddle horn with desperation. But he could not hold. He lost his strength, cried, "Gail!" pitifully, and dropped to the trail. And the thin echo of a shot came drifting down from the ridge.

Frozen with the terrible suddenness of his deliverance, Dane sat staring at the lawman's body at the feet of the fiddling horse. Then, rousing, cast his eyes toward the higher ground. Two horsemen were coming down the slope, under spur. And at first glance, Dane knew them. Blaze Kimbro and Con Turple.

The mystery of it caused Dane to lose valuable clock-ticks. That those two possemen, sullen at being cheated of the hanging they craved, had followed, shot to kill him and tallied the sheriff instead seemed the only reasonable explanation. Then why were they not shooting now, unless they were sure of their trussed victim, now that his guardian was dead? The hot breath of disaster fanned a spark of self-preservation in the man from Arizona.

Swiftly he lowered his head, got the saddle horn under the loop about his neck, slipped it off his head. He stepped off his horse then, stretched out beside the sheriff, feeling for the man's keys with his trussed hands. The cuffs were loose or he never could have fitted the key and released himself.

The two horsemen were very close when Dane rose, his own gun in one hand, the sheriff's in the other. Across his saddle, he unleashed a hot double fire that turned the two confident possemen into an abrupt about face and headlong retreat.

Dane was stuffing shells in the guns when he heard a shuddery groan break from the sheriff. He knelt beside the man. It was then he heard the growing rumble of hoofbeats, turned his head and saw the whole posse sweeping up the valley toward him. And, like an avalanche, the weight of his position crashed upon him. Here he was with two freshly fired weapons in his hands, the sheriff desperately wounded at his feet. And a score of men racing toward him, over half of whom had clamored already to take him away from the sheriff and hang him. It filled him with terror.

CHAPTER TWO

Fugitive

HE CAUGHT his rein, swung into the saddle. His last impression as he flashed away was that the lawman's eyes were open, his lips moving. Then Dane was hanging low over the withers to escape the rifle lead whizzing over him, praying that his pony might not be hit, that it might have speed to outdistance the pursuit that already was roaring along his backtrail.

For all the danger speeding him onward, Dane Ralston counted himself lucky. He was free, unharmed and the money entrusted to his care was still in his saddlebags. His horse had been traveling easily and should be able to outrun the ponies of the posse. By hook or crook, he must contrive to deliver the money to Martin Pierce. Once that was accom-

plished, he could strike southward and soon be out of reach of those who would fasten him with some bandit's crime.

Dane ran for it, drawing swiftly away from the posse. But Fate decreed it to be more difficult than he planned. A few miles away from the scene of the sheriff's fall, Dane's pony picked up a stone in its frog, and went lame. And though he relieved it almost at once, the animal's speed was lessened. Attending the beast took time enough for the posse to come within sight again. After that it was a stubborn chase, Dane finding it impossible to shake them off his trail.

Come nightfall, he cut back, twisted and chilled his sign, covering enough northing and easting to be certain in his own mind that they could never trace him.

But his luck was bad. He was sprawled out, resting while his mount fed in the dawnlight, when the dispirited posse popped over the brow of a hill and spotted him. That was a close thing, and Dane escaped in a hail of lead. So, for another day, it was a grim game of hide-and-seek, between weary, desperate men who often left their jaded, failing ponies and stalked each other on foot.

At times, when the going was flat and straight away, Dane dozed in the saddle during that heart breaking day. Some of the possemen had quit, but the rest hung doggedly on.

Desperately, Dane held a lead that kept him out of rifle shot, praying for the lazy sun to complete its westering course. He was exhausted, hungry, but the greater punishment was worry for his horse. The beast limped badly now. It was gaunt and weakened, stumbling often, but still willing. Dane's only consolation was that the mounts of his pursuers were just as badly in need of rest and food.

The coming of the second night brought relief to Dane's spirit, but no rest for himself and horse. He kept the beast walking, hour after hour, under the cold stars, pausing for a few moments every hour or so to let the horse crop a few mouthfuls of grass.

And so, in the gray light before the true dawn, he calculated that he was at least twenty miles away from where the posse had last seen him. He was done. His pony was ready to give up. Dane rode him into the thick tangle of cottonwood, willow and rose of a creek bottom, drew the saddle, staked the pony on good grass and within reach of water, and threw himself down with the carelessness born of complete exhaustion.

WHEN Dane awoke, dawn was just breaking again. He had slept the clock around twice. Birds were chirping as they roused from their roosts and the air vibrated to a peculiar plaintive note that Dane couldn't quite identify. Rising on legs weak from hunger, he listened. As he puzzled, he heard the distant barking of a dog and caught the unmistakable taint of woodsmoke on the air.

He moved cautiously from his covert and had his answer. Less than a half mile away, nothing more than an undulating gray blot in the growing light, a flock of sheep stretched from their beds and fed inchingly across the plain, a shepherd dog frolicking before them. Down close to the willows two sheepherders cooked breakfast over a cheery little fire.

Dane, trembling with eagerness, saddled his renewed pony and rode over to the sheep camp. Two Basques halted their breakfast preparations to stare at him. He was in appearance a cowboy. And cowboys, as a rule, were their deadly enemies. One reached for a shotgun, but Dane held up his hand, palm foremost, in the universal sign of peace.

"No war in the neck this morning, boys," he grinned faintly, alighting. "Nothing but a big hole gripping my mortal carcass. How's about havin' breakfast with you this morning?"

Their sudden relaxing, their instant broad smiles, revealed that they understood the rangeland tradition that a cowboy will not break bread with an enemy. They invited him to a hearty breakfast of roast mutton and hard-crust sourdough bread—both cooked in a firehole, with strong black coffee to wash it down. He offered to pay, but they wouldn't hear to it. They inquired as to where he had come from. And, when they heard it was Arizona, one expressed delight.

"My broth'r, she leeve een Arizona," he beamed. "She one of the bes' damn sheep sheerer een thees country, my broth'r Marius. You know heem? Marius Sabanichi?"

His face fell when Dane disclaimed any knowledge of his kin, or of the Date Creek country where he worked. They talked over a lot of things, as men will who are starved for companionship. And, when he had finished, rolled and lighted a cigarette. Done's mind came back to his business.

"You know Shoshone City?" he demanded.

Both nodded. "Si, senor. W'at you lak to know, amigo?"

"I've got to see a man name uh Martin Pierce there. How'll I find his house, or do you boys know him?"

"Seguro! Sure we know thees Martin Pierce." They were all smiles. "But you do not find hees 'ouse een Shoshone City, señor. Thees man, she leeve on hees rancho. Straight north mos' forty mile. On Hot Creek, twenty mile wes' of Shoshone. You find heem all right."

Dane took his leave of the good Samaritans, refreshed by sleep, nourished by good food and mounted on a horse renewed by rest and good grazing. Following their directions, he loped northward, casting occasional nervous glances behind and along the skylines that marched to his right and left. But his luck had changed for the better and not a mounted man did he see until he crossed Hot Creek, in mid-afternoon.

Beyond the little watercourse he found a well traveled road and, as he sat his horse there, wondering which way to turn, a rider came racing about a point of the headland. And Dane threw his hand to his gun, for he was in the middle of a county where a vengeful law had or would be setting every man in it to bounty hunting.

BUT this rider proved to be a girl, and a very pretty girl too, Dane decided as she drew near. She was dressed in denims and rode astraddle, her hair flying wildly in the wind. Dane held up his hand and she reined down in a cloud of dust. Her cheeks were rosy from the stinging bite of the wind, and there was a faint smile on her lips as she regarded him from the saddle. But there was touch-me-not in her direct, powder-gray eyes.

"What was it?" she asked.

Dane tipped his hat. "Excuse me, ma'am, I'm looking for the ranch belonging to Martin Pierce. Can you tell me, please, which way to go."

"I sure can," she told him. "I'm Martin Pierce's daughter. Gail Pierce."

"Name uh Dane Ralston, ma'am," grinned the Arizona man. "Which I shore am lucky to meet up with you like this. I've come a long way to see yore dad."

He fell silent, a little frightened that he had almost blurted out his business against the orders of Old D. L. Truett. Gail Pierce! Dane recalled the groaned name: "Gail," wrenched from the shocked lips of the wounded sheriff. Women were scarce on the prairie rangelands, and he could understand even a grizzled old badger like the lawman aspiring to a lovely girl like this one. Mistaking his hesitation, the girl's eyes hardened.

"What did you want with my father?" she demanded, brusquely.

"I want to talk business with him."

"What kind of business?"

"Sorry, ma'am, but it'll have to be confidential between him and me. Where can I find him?"

"He's not home." She was suddenly nervous and upset, her fine eyes clouded with shadows. And Dane hated himself for drawing so fine a line. What harm could it do to tell her? After all, her dad's troubles were hers too. And it would make talking easier.

"I know what you're worryin' about, Miss Gail," he grinned. "An' you've a right to know the truth, so I'll tell you what brought me all the way from Arizona. Your worries are all over, yours and your dad's. I've got the five thousand dollars he sent for—right here." He patted the saddle bags.

Gail Pierce looked startled. "Five thousand dollars?" Her tone was incredulous. "My father sent for five thousand dollars?"

"Yes ma'am."

"What for?"

It was Dane's turn to be surprised. "Don't you know, ma'am? Ain't there a mortgage, or something? Some debt your dad owes?"

"Not that I know of. You sure this money is for Martin Pierce?"

"Plumb sure, Miss."

"Who sent it?"

"My boss—D. L. Truett."

"Dan Truett? Why he used to be dad's partner, years ago. And he is in Arizona; I know that." She stroked her jaw, studiously. "You say dad sent for this money?"

"Yes'm. Said he had to have it by September first or he'd be ruined."

"September first? Why that's tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow? You must be wrong ma'am. I've kept a count stick on my ride an' I had it figgered for three days from now."

"You missed two counts, cowboy. The first is tomorrow. And I don't know of a thing coming up on the first that dad would be needing that much money for."

PUZZLING, she stirred her pony into a canter and Dane rode beside her, admiring the lovely picture she made. But it was plain that the news he had brought had added to her worries. And Dane wondered how much of a mistake he had made in telling her something her own father hadn't trusted her with.

They turned through a gate and rode into a well kept ranch—a house, barn, outbuildings and stout corrals. Almost as if she had forgotten Dane, she dismounted before the house, stamped up the steps and slumped into a cowhide chair, staring off into the distance. Dane moved to the porch and took a chair near her.

"I wonder what all this means," she puzzled, as if talking to herself.

"I reckon the time for wonderin' is past, Miss Gail," Dane suggested, softly. "If tomorrow is the first, it's time we got word to your dad so he can have this money he evidently needs so bad. Can you get word to him?"

The words seemed to rouse her. She shuddered, turned eyes to him that were filled with trouble. "No, I can't get word to him!" She almost screamed it. "I can't even see him. They brought me word this morning that he was desperately wounded, shot in the back by the man who robbed the Shoshone-Sheridan stage. I rode to town right away, but they wouldn't let me see him; said he was too low. So—so I had to come home, arriving just now. The outlaw who shot my father was described as tall, slender and dark—" she looked Dane over appraisingly, her mouth hardening, "and they say he got away with *five thousand dollars!*

She stared challengingly into his eyes and must have seen the chaos that gripped his mind. The truth was pounding home,

throbbing through him with cruel hammer strokes. Martin Pierce and the sheriff called Deacon were one and the same!

As if spoken from afar off, Dane heard the girl say, "I'm looking for that man, Dane Ralston. And finding him, I'm killing him on sight."

Her knuckles were white from her tight grip on the pearl butt of her thirty-eight.

In the blinding light of his sudden revelation, Dane didn't know what to do or say. Deep regret swayed him, that he hadn't known it, back there when the posse picked him up. Then he might have made a clean breast of his trust, turned the money over to Martin Pierce and been well on his way south by now.

Because he could think of nothing better to say, Dan murmured, "Your—your father is the sheriff, ma'am?"

"Of course. Deacon Pierce, they call him, because he insists on treating his prisoners like he would want to be treated, if he was in jail. As kind a man as ever lived, and now some dog has murdered him."

"You sure he's bad shot, Miss Gail?"

"The doctor won't let anybody see him —not for days."

"Humph!" Dane pondered, his thoughts resolving themselves only into an argument. "This robber, Miss—the one that robbed the stage—does it look reasonable that he would shoot your dad, ride off with five thousand dollars and then hit a bee-line for the Martin Pierce Ranch, to pay over the money?"

"N-no, it doesn't."

"Course it don't. I know what you're thinking, ma'am, but you're wrong. I've brought this money from D. L. Truett, like I said. We've got to get it to your dad and fix it so he can use it—before tomorrow."

"But how?" she demanded, and he could see she was half convinced.

CHAPTER THREE

Murderer's Choice

DANE didn't answer. His eyes, questing nervously, had picked up the dust bomb sweeping along the road. With all the feelings of a hunted creature, he watched its progress. And then, as if divining that the rider stirring that dust would turn into the Pierce ranch, he rose, walked to his saddle for the money and spatted the pony down toward the corrals. He returned to the porch, the saddlebags on his arm.

The girl was staring at him, fascinated. "What are you going to do?" she asked.

Dane's face was terribly bleak. "Somebody's comin'," he said, stiffly. "And it's time I told you the whole story."

Tersely, he recited his experiences, starting from the time he had seen that rider signalling on the ridgeback. "And with them two killers bearin' down upon me," he finished, "I shucked the rope, got your dad's keys and took off the cuffs. Then, with his gun and mine, I smoked 'em into a hard run. I'd have stayed then to look after your dad, but here come the posse, just a-faunchin' to stretch my neck. It taken me two days to outrun 'em and —and here I am."

"Who—who were the pair that shot dad?" she demanded, rising to face him with her breast heaving. "Would you know them?"

"Yes'm. But here comes some jigger an' there isn't time to talk about it. Tell you later. In the meantime, I'll be inside the house, with a drawn gun. If this gent wants trouble, he'll find plenty inside."

He walked into the house and sat down to wait.

From his seat, he could see the rider turn into the ranchyard, whirl up to the porch, curb cruelly and step down with a wide grin and a gallant lift of his wide hat.

"H'are you, Gail honey?" he greeted.

"Rode out to fetch you word of your dad. Saw Doc Stratton just before I left. He said Martin was about as good as could be expected. Said there'd be a crisis within forty-eight hours and that there was no use worryin' till then."

It was Blaze Kimbro, and Dane burned with hatred of the man, watching him step briskly to the porch, throw an affectionate arm about the girl and draw her to him. He would have kissed her then, save that she squirmed from his embrace.

"Please, Mister Kimbro. Don't do that."

"Still touchy, eh girl?" Rancor edged Kimbro's voice. "I'm still poison to you after all these months. Well, you'll get over that when we're married. I'll make you love me yet."

"I'm not going to marry you," said the girl flatly. "I've made that clear to you."

"I won't be discouraged, Gail. An' sometime I'll break that pride of yours. You're in a bad spot right now, girl. No hands on the place, no money, nobody to take care of you in case your dad dies—"

"Dad won't die, Mister Kimbro!" She said it courageously, but her trembling lips belied her affected bravery.

"You must be brave, Gail," said the rancher. "We all feel that Martin Pierce is on his death bed, right now. If and when it happens, I want you to know that you can throw your outfit into my iron and take up your position as mistress of the Wagon Wheel spread."

Bitterly, Gail said, "And you call yourself a friend of my father. He picks up an assassin's bullet and you come around like a buzzard to talk me into throwing his outfit under your iron. No, thanks; I'll find some easier way to get along. We're not that far gone."

"You misunderstand me, honey," protested the man, making a futile attempt to capture her hand. "I'll do anything I can to help Martin and the same for you."

"If you mean that," she responded, "tell me what you know about dad owing some money. Do you know what he might owe five thousand dollars for?"

THE man started, his eyes narrowing upon her. "Why—er—no. Five thousand dollars—whee-ew. That's a lot of money to owe. I don't know as I understand. An' where would Martin get that much money, what with the tally of rustled cattle he claims?"

"I've got the money," said the girl, firmly, "and all I want now is to find who to pay it to—tomorrow. September first is the deadline, so it appears, and I want to clear dad's debt."

Dane grinned fiercely, noting Kimbro's narrowing stare at the girl. "Who told you about this?" he demanded.

"I refuse to answer that, Mister Kimbro.

"As you please, girl." The man shrugged, turning away. "I think somebody's been hoorawing you. But I'll inquire in town an' ride out when I find something. See you later, honey."

He strode hurriedly to his horse, mounted, tossed his hand and spurred swiftly away. Dane, drawing a long breath, dropped his gun into its sheath and moved to the door. The yeast of a shocking idea was working in him as he faced the girl.

"The man seemed in quite a sweat to get away, after you told him you had the money, Gail."

She nodded. "I noticed that. And he seemed to freeze right up. Look at him run that horse. What do you suppose is in his mind?"

Dane didn't tell her what he thought. He didn't want to add to her already heavy mental burden. But the more he thought about the chain of events that had enmeshed him, the more he leaned to the belief that Kimbro had loaned Martin Pierce money, with the ranch as security. And, learning somehow that the sheriff

was borrowing money outside to pay up, had tried to murder him in order to make sure of the Pierce cattle outfit—and the girl heir. The worry it left with Dane was enhanced by Kimbro's change when he knew the money had arrived, and his hurry to be off for town. Would he dare undertake to remove the last chance of the sheriff's recovery—before tomorrow?

Face contorted with the savagery of his reaction, Dane said, "I'll tell you one thing that's likely in his mind right now. That's murder."

"Murder?" Gail cringed. "Who?"

"Your dad. Kimbro's riding in to kill Martin Pierce."

Gail's attempt to laugh failed miserably. "Your imagination's running away with you. Kimbro's short on principles, maybe, but he's not that bad. Why would he want to kill my dad?"

"For the same reason he tried to kill him when your father was bringing me in. He and a man named Con Turple were the pair who fired on us. They were the ones that turned tail and ran when I cut loose at 'em!"

"No." Gail stared unbelievingly. "Blaze Kimbro and Con Turple, partners in the big Wagon Wheel and our neighbors. Why—?"

"So he can't pay off his debt to them, whatever it is," guessed Dane. "I'm riding to Shoshone to take cards in their play. If I'm not too late, I'll try to slip in a cold deck."

Gail Pierce changed. First fear clouded her eyes, then there was a stiffening of her nerve and a vast determination hardened her.

"You can't do that, Dane Ralston," she said, sternly. "They want to hang you down there, because they think you shot dad after killing the stage driver and looting the coach. You wouldn't last five minutes. I can't let you go."

"My job's only half done, Gail. You can't stop me."

"Yes I can!" As he moved down the steps, her .38 flashed out to cover him. "You come back here and sit down. There must be some other way."

He saw stubbornness in her eyes, knew she was keyed to the point of hysteria.

"Gail," he told her, "you know what you're doing? You're condemning your dad to death and turning your outfit over to the men who will kill him. If you want that bad enough to kill for it, pull the trigger." He turned away from her and, from the corner of his eye saw the gun waver.

"Wait, Dane!" she cried. "Come back!"

But Dane was running now, hitting his saddle Pony Express and roaring past her on the trail of Blaze Kimbro.

"Wait!" she cried, and already she was moving to her horse. "Wait for me, Dane. I'll go with you."

"Stay here!" he roared back. "Shoshone will be no place for you tonight."

And the last he saw of her, she was standing beside her pony, staring after him with a forlorn loneliness that touched his heart.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death Swings a Loop

EVENING was at hand. Kimbo had a long start and the country was strange to Dane. He rode recklessly, scourging his already weakened pony far beyond a safe speed with a prayer that he might not be too late. His faithful mount gave the best it had, good enough for half the distance. But, after ten miles, it slowed perceptibly and Dane could do nothing to prevent a steady lessening of its gait.

The road was well traveled, with no chance of getting off it. Night closed down and those last miles stretched endlessly. Dane saw the lights of Shoshone long before he reached the place.

He came to the east border of the town, dropped into a coulee to tie his

spent beast and entered the sprawled cow country metropolis, hanging to the deep gloom of an alley that ran behind the buildings on the south side of the street.

Reaching the center of the town, he cut between buildings to the street. There were a half dozen large saloons on that thoroughfare, all doing business. Lights burned here and there, but other establishments seemed closed. There were a few townsmen moving along the walks. And, because he had no other way of knowing his way about, Dane halted one of these.

"Excuse me, neighbor," he muttered, stepping before a hurrying man. "Where's there a doctor hereabouts."

"Doctor?" The man moved to the edge of the walk and pointed. "See that two-story building yonder. Side staircase on the far side. Doc Stratton runs a kind of a hospital on the second floor. Ain't always there, but he will be tonight. He's settin' up with a dyin' man. What's the matter? Somebody sick?"

"Got a foxtail in my ear," mourned Dane. "It's giving me hell."

"Too bad," sympathized the townsman. "Doc will fix you up all right. Stranger, ain't yuh?" The man finished rolling a cigarette, thumbed a match alight. As he fired the tube, his eyes were fixed on Dane, who lowered his own.

"Yeah. This is one town in Wyoming I don't know so good. Much obliged."

He stepped around the man, turning, when he had gone a few rods, to see his interrogator hurrying into one of the busier saloons. It worried him. For that man he had recognized as a member of the posse that had caught him down in the hill country.

Hoping against hope the fellow hadn't recognized him, Dane speeded his steps toward the barnlike structure where Doc Stratton had his hospital. There was a light upstairs and Dane paused at the foot of the staircase to keen the air for sounds of alarm and to look the walk up and down for men who might be watching the place. There were neither. So, removing his spurs and taking the creaky steps on tip-toe, he ascended to the upper landing, where a closed panel gave into Stratton's office.

Dane tried the door. It gave to his hand and he stepped into total darkness. The pungent smell of hot oil told him that a lamp had just been extinguished. Closing the door softly behind him, Dane stood listening. All was quiet. After a bit, he struck a match and, in its beam, made out the details of the doctor's outer reception and waiting room. Straight ahead was another door. Dane blew out the match and went through it, quietly.

NOW he saw the thin, horizontal beam of light marking the threshold of a door and to his ears came the low murmur of voices. Cursing the creaking of an insecure floor, he crossed the interval carefully, pausing with his ear to the panel. Words, spoken by Blaze Kimbro, came clearly to him, though they were spoken in the subdued tones of utter confidence.

"—an' so, Doc, where you made your mistake was in tellin' folks that Martin's crisis would be in forty-eight hours from the time you got him."

"I told the truth." Doctor Stratton's voice quivered with wrath. "And, furthermore, I'm telling you now that the least excitement will rob Martin Pierce of whatever chance he's got. I advise you to take your men and get out."

"Least excitement will bump him off, eh?" Kimbro's voice was taunting. "Now ain't that too bad? For when the old man sees me kill you—"

"Kill me?" The medico was horrified. "What foolishness is this, Kimbro?"

"Foolishness?" Kimbro laughed. "That ain't foolishness, Doc. It's insurance. When he sees me put a slug through your guts, he'll give up the ghost. Then I'll put one in him, fix the guns so it looks like

you an' him fought it out an' be among the mourners at the double funeral the town gives its two most influential citizens."

"But why, Kimbro? Why?"

"I'll tell you why, Stratton. It's like this—"

"Cut out the wind an' get it over with, Blaze." Con Turple's sullen warning intruded. "You're wastin' good time an' somebody'll come hornin' into the play."

"Shut up, Con!" rapped Kimbro. "I'm runnin' this show. If anybody comes up them rickety stairs, we'll hear 'em before they're half way up. Now, as I was sayin', Doc, this sheriff of ours ain't no angel, none whatever. You see, me an' Con sorta growed up with him. When we was yearlings, we taken a ride with him an' accidentally run across a stage. Martin decided to rob it, an' nothin' we could say would change his mind—"

"That's a lie, Kimbro." Martin Pierce's protest came weakly. "You slickered me into going with you, robbed the stage and drilled the shotgun guard. You made me a wanted man an'—"

Kimbro grated a laugh. "Careful of excitement, Sheriff. It's your word against mine, an' mine's backed with a gun. Anyhow, you escaped the law, after takin' the money from us at the point of a gun an' sendin' it back to Wells Fargo. You escaped us too, or you'd have learned we stopped another stage an' got the money back. It taken me an' Con years to find you an' start collectin' on the old debt. We've glaumed plenty of your cattle an' forced you into coming to us for money. That's all we wanted. 'Cause we aimed to fix it so's you never got money enough together to pay off. But somehow that smart gal of yores had got the money. An' that costs you your life, Martin. An' you too, Doc, 'cause dead man tell no tales."

"Good God, Kimbro!" There was an awful pleading in Doc Stratton's voice. "You can't kill us in cold blood."

"Can't I?" Kimbro's voice was husky with lust. "Gimme your coat, Con, to wrap around this gun. No use raisin' the town. Bull, you watch Pierce while I do this, just in case he ain't quite as bad as Doc says. Doc, back against that wall—"

DANE, trembling beyond that thin panel, had heard enough to set him afire. Every fibre of him burned to jerk his gun, smash his way into that room for a smoky accounting.

Caution whispered arguments in his ear that held him in steel bonds. If he were to burst in there like that, he could not hope to save Martin Pierce, for the excitement of a killing gun battle would slay him as surely as would hot lead. Moreover, if he were to carry war to Kimbro, Turple and whatever gunmen were with them, and he should fail, Kimbro would be in the clear by simply blaming the whole affair upon Dane's perverted savagery.

Even if he were successful in killing those renegades, he still could not win. The chances were good that he could never get out of town. He would be seized by the townsmen who already had him convicted of murder, stage robbery, assault upon Martin Pierce—all that in addition to the destruction of Kimbro and Turple, if he brought that about.

All the cards were against him, unless he tiptoed back the way he had come, found his horse and cleared out. This place was bad luck to him, had been from the very start.

He turned back into the darkness, took two steps in retreat. Then he thought of Gail, about to be orphaned, impoverished and placed in the grasp of a human devil. He whirled, drawing his gun. He hit the door with his shoulder, plunged through with a crash.

In his first photographic impression of that room, he saw the bed, the ruddy face of Martin Pierce on the pillow, Kimbro

wrapping a coat about a gun as he stood before the white-faced doctor, Con Turple in his shirt sleeves, a step or two away, and an ox-like giant hanging over the foot of the bed, looking over the sights of his gun at the helpless sheriff. That image was but momentary, and fleeting.

A vast roar broke from the droopy-lipped mouth of the one called Bull. He, being the only one of the three facing the entry, was first to see Dane and recognize the threat. "Look out, Blaze!" he roared, and came to his feet with his gun swinging.

Dane killed him without checking the forward movement of his dynamic entrance. He plowed to a halt, pivoting on his heels, his muscles like tooled steel and his nerves blocked off by the cold stream pouring along his spine.

Even as he turned, he saw Blaze Kimbro in the corner of his eye. The man, a slender, lithe, cat-like individual, was discarding the coat even as he spun with leveled pistol. It was an even thing between them. Both were spinning; both had their guns palmed. Dane saw the sudden widening of the man's eyes as recognition came. Murder flared there then—Dane saw the flash and felt the heat of it across the distance.

Time seemed to stand still and actions seemed minimized to slow motion. The overflow of a mighty wrath was on Kimbro's dark cheeks, the muscles ridging up sharply beneath the stubbled skin. A short, rough gust of breath came from his throat, cut off by shuddering gusts of sound that rocked the walls.

Two shots, so closely spaced as to sound like one, combined their echoes. The support of Dane's left leg gave way, spilling him onto the floor. The fall saved his life, for Con Turple's shot snarled over his head and went tinkling out through a shattered pane.

But still Dane could not take his eyes from Kimbro's face. Hot, fiery, filled with fury, it was, even though the man was sinking down. He fell upon his side, biting his lip as he struggled to bring his gun up for the finishing shot. A gun was roaring, nor did Dane know it was his own until the rising smoke stung his nostrils, until Kimbro seemed to wilt. The man's head bumped against the floor and he lay still.

DANE turned his eyes up then. Above him leered red-faced Con Turple, a savage grin upon his face as he drew back the hammer and threw down on the man from Arizona. Dane was throwing his gun to meet that menace, but he knew it was hopeless. He had tallied two, but the third one had him cold.

He braced himself for the exquisite agony of bullet shock. Again the room shivered, the walls beating back the echoes of another shot—the last. And suddenly Dane knew the meaning of the word, miracle.

He saw no flare from the muzzle of Turple's gun. He felt no shock, no pain. And, strangely, Con Turple was no longer a menace. He stood poised on the balls of his feet, both long arms sagging. Then his gun dropped to the floor and his chin depressed. He tried to lift his head toward the bed, a last sullen, reckless glare in his eyes. His lips formed an oath and he pitched forward, crashing down and sprawling shapelessly beside Dane.

It was unbelievable, that deliverance, but it was true. And the Arizona man turned to another fact, equally unbelievable. Far from being dead from sudden excitement, Martin Pierce stood beside the bed in his nightshirt, a smoking gun hanging at his side and battle light still blazing in his pale blue eyes. He was looking at Dane.

"You bad hit, son?" he asked, with none of the weakness of a man near death from a gunshot wound.

Dane's finger did some swift exploring,

and then he was climbing up with a shaky laugh. "Nothin' but a scratch along the side of my leg," he confessed. "But it knocked me down like he'd cut off my foot."

Relief cleared the sheriff's eyes and he turned his attention to an insistent hammering on a side door. "Let 'em in, Doc," he ordered. "Turple must have locked that door to be on the safe side."

The shocked medico shook himself, took a few steps and turned a key. A crowd of men came from an adjoining room. Among them was Bunny, the cowboy who had found the money in Dane's saddlebags, and others who had ridden in the posse. Their eyes were on the dead men, on the sheriff, on Dane. No one spoke.

"You heard it all, boys?" Martin Pierce said.

"Every word, Martin," gruffed one of the men. "You sure had it figgered, about Kimbro and Turple coming to kill you, though none of us understand how. We was scairt of the worst, when we found ourselves locked out."

"An' howcome this stage robber to be here, Pierce?" hollered another, levelling his finger at Dane. "This gent who shot you in the back?"

Martin Pierce smiled, tossed his gun to the bed and reached for his pants.

"You see, boys, this don't happen to be the bank robber, though like you I was sure he wasn't nothin' else. But when he said he come from Gila Bend, in Arizona, with five thousand dollars from his boss, it set me to doubtin'. For I had sent to Gila Bend for that amount of money—from my old partner, Dan Truett. Some of you will remember Dan. Though I hadn't heard from Truett, I began wonderin' if mebby he hadn't sent the money on, by Ralston here. That's why I decided to take him in myself. I was on the point of gettin' the facts from him, when Kimbro and Turple bushwhacked me, like I told you before—"

HE STOPPED to listen, as the building shook to the tread of boots on the outer staircase. He chuckled. "That'll fetch the town," he commented, and went on, "When I saw Ralston pour the lead to them two crooks, I knew he was my man. An' though I was too near knocked out to let him know I knew, I had sense enough to realize he'd get through somehow an' get that money to me. You boys had me real scairt when the bulk of you went chousin' off after him without waitin' to talk to me. Hell, I could have saved you one damn hard ride. So when I got back here, an' you came back empty handed, I made a deal with Doc Stratton an' lay doggo, with my gun under the sheets. An' damned if the hammer didn't hang up in the bed clothes when I made my play. That came close to finishing you, Ralston."

"Too close," acknowledged Dane.

A crowd was streaming into the upper story of Doc Stratton's building. And Gail Pierce was heading them. Reaching the threshold of that embattled room, she halted abruptly, caught her breath, her eyes unnaturally bright.

"Thank God!" she cried, then: "Martin Pierce, you get right back into that bed before—"

"Anything but that, daughter," grinned the sheriff. "I've got a nasty sore along my ribs that Doc says will be plump healed in a week. I'm healthy as an ox, for all the white lies Doc spread about me, shut of a lot of my troubles an' twice indebted to Dane Ralston, this messenger from Dan Truett, about as good a fighting man as I ever care to meet. Dane, I take it you an' Gail have met. If you haven't, why you sure've been wasting time."

Dane's eyes went to the girl. She was coming to him, her face a little pale in the presence of death, but her eyes filled with a vast relief and a gentleness the Arizona man had never seen in a woman's eyes. She laid her hand on his arm.

"I—I was terribly afraid—for you," she stammered. "After what you did, to come in here and be shot down by those—those—"

"Pshaw," protested Dane. "I can take care of myself, Gail."

"No more than that?" she asked, slyly, and looked at him as no girl had ever done before.

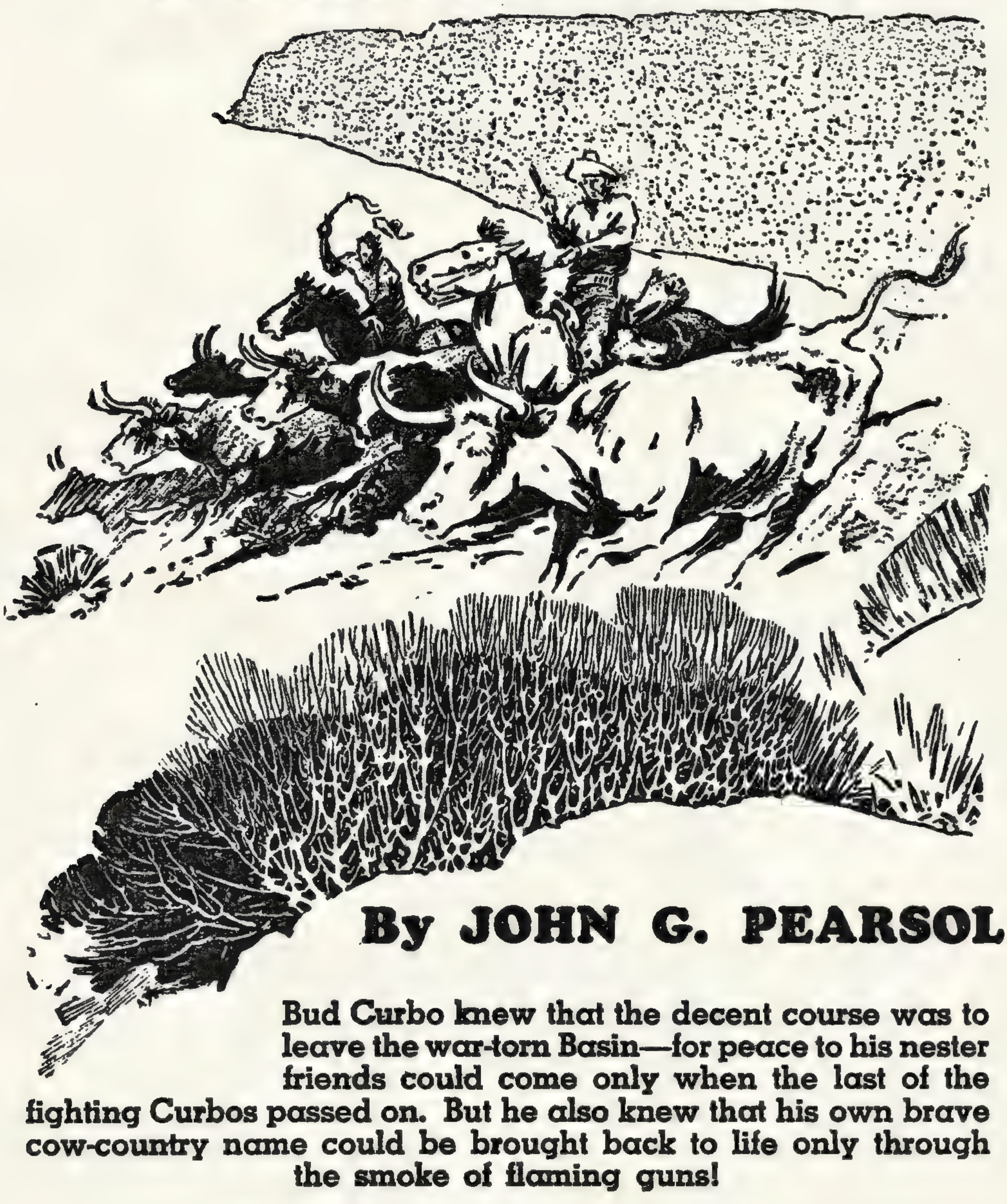
In the presence of all that curious crowd, Dane put his arm about her, drew her close. She laid her head against his breast, listening to the increased tempo of his heartbeat. Across the room, the sheriff cleared his throat, raucously.

"*Hrrrumph!* Well I'm damned, Ralston, but you are sudden. You better break away from that gal of mine an' grab yourself some shut-eye. I've a hunch I won't be needing that money you fetched up from Arizona, so I'll be sending you back with it."

Dane grinned at him across the girl's shoulder. "If you want that money returned, Martin Pierce, you'll take it back yourself. D. L. Truett will be as glad to see you as to see me. I've had too much trouble gettin' my luck straightened out on this range to go runnin' off when it turns good. No, that money's on my saddle an' I'm deliverin' it to you as per promise. What you do with it makes no never-minds to me. Personally I'll be seein' a gal about a job."

THE END

FIGHTING NESTERS OF PERDITION PEAK



By JOHN G. PEARSOL

Bud Curbo knew that the decent course was to leave the war-torn Basin—for peace to his nester friends could come only when the last of the fighting Curbos passed on. But he also knew that his own brave cow-country name could be brought back to life only through the smoke of flaming guns!

CHAPTER ONE

A New Grave to Dig

THE cattle were thin, gaunt, and their ribs showed prominently under their scraggy, scant-haired hides. Their thick dry tongues protruded from their mouths, and the dust from their draggy hoofs rose slowly to hit Bud Curbo in the face.

Old Grady Curbo, beside Bud, slumped tiredly in his saddle, discouragement in his lined visage.

Bud Curbo narrowed his eyes and his lips twisted as he watched the cattle.

As the herd came by, his gun came up. . . .

Range-war novelette

"How long are we going to let Roman Krebb run his whizzer on Crazy Hermit Basin?" he asked his father. "When will you take up a gun and fight for your rights?"

Old Grady Curbo smiled.

"I'll never fight for money, son," he said. "All the money in the world won't pay for the death of a man. It's better to die yourself than to bring death to others."

The bitter twist on Bud Curbo's lips didn't alter. His gray eyes swept the dry range where Curbo cattle and nester cattle were dying, then moved over to the shining barbed wire that ran the length of Roman Krebb's range. Water was plentiful there; free water; government water that Krebb claimed as his own. A blaze of resentment glowed in Bud's eyes. Why not fight for what was his? Why starve when Krebb was rolling in wealth, amass-

ing a fortune from land the Curbos had as much right to as he did.

The cattle ahead of Bud and Grady stopped and milled. Bud stared through the dust, let his smoky eyes rest on two riders planted in the path of the herd. Bud knew them. They were Larkin and Frazier, punchers for Krebb.

"What's this?" asked Bud.

"This is a showdown," said Frazier. "You an' your old man stole another bunch of cattle last night. You cut the fence and drove 'em south. Now we find you drivin' some of your own skinny cattle up the same trail to blot out the tracks."

"You call that proof of rustling?" Bud asked. "Just some tracks you think we're blottin' now?"

"That's all the proof we need," said Frazier. "We don't even need that with a Curbo. They've always been thieves, an' always will be. You'll stay in jail a long time for this!"

Bud glanced at the old man. Grady Curbo's face was pale. The lines about his mouth were deep, bitter.

"Maybe I was wrong, Bud," he said huskily. "Money doesn't mean much, but when a man's liberty is threatened it's a different matter. I'll never let Roman Krebb frame me into jail!"

Bud Curbo stared icy-eyed at Frazier.

"For twenty years Roman Krebb has done everything he could to break us," he said. "He fenced our rightful water. He killed my three uncles. He stole our cattle. And we've never fought back because my father didn't believe in war. But if you live through this, tell Krebb that we've started to fight! Th' man who says a Curbo ever stole a cow is a dirty liar!"

FRAZIER cursed and his hand dived for a gun. Frazier's gun glinted in the light as Bud reached for his. Suddenly it seemed as though the silent valley went crazy with shuddering, racketing sound. Then it was quiet, and Bud Curbo stared at Frazier, sprawled on the dusty ground, at Larkin, who held a hand to a bloody shoulder, his gun down in the dust.

Bud holstered his gun. "Load Frazier on his horse, Larkin," he told the puncher.

He watched while Larkin took Frazier away. Then he looked at Grady Curbo, white-faced, hunched over in his saddle, a growing red stain on the faded front of his blue shirt.

"Dad!" called Bud. "Is it bad? Is—?"

Old Grady Curbo stared toward the basin where a cabin was visible on the flats. He shook his head.

"Let's ride on, Bud," he said. "I'd like to get home."

They moved slowly. Bud, as he watched his father, felt as though a knife was being turned cruelly about in his vitals. Grady Curbo was dying. Grady knew it. Bud knew it. And Grady wanted to get home so he could die there.

They stopped at the ranchhouse porch and Bud lifted old Grady out of the saddle.

"Sit me on the porch, son," Grady said, "where I can see."

Bud lowered him gently into a huge, hide-covered chair. The old man leaned back and waved Bud away when he tried to look at the wound.

"It's no use," he said, with definite finality.

He looked out at the row of graves in the yard, the graves of his three brothers and his wife, and smiled bitterly.

"I tried to keep from it," he said, his voice weakening. "I tried not to think that Roman Krebb was low-down. After all, he did have a reason to think that we stole his cattle. They were gone. Your uncles and I were there, guarding them, and they were never found again. I tried not to think that Krebb killed my brothers when we found them dead on the range.

I tried to live without bitterness and hate in my heart. I wanted to die knowing that no matter what men thought, I had always done my best, always been honest, always thought well of my fellow men."

Old Grady stopped and his faded eyes found the row of wooden crosses.

"An honest man must be honest in what he thinks as well as in what he does," he went on after a while. "An' I wonder about all this that has happened. I look back and give Krebb a reason for his hate. He's fenced the range to break me, but he's roused the nesters against him while he did it. A spark would start a nester war that would wipe Roman Krebb off the earth. His hate must be strong to risk that. He must think he's right.

"Up till five years ago, it was all a battle of fences and water. But then it started to be a battle of guns. First it was Dan, then Pete and Harry, that we found dead. Our cattle commenced to be stolen. I can hardly credit Krebb with that. Why, all of a sudden, did he start to steal and kill? I can't think that Krebb is a murderer and a thief."

The old man stopped. Bud Curbo felt that pain of grief inside him again. He wondered what Roman Krebb would say if he could hear this old man's last words, a man who, even as he died, declared that he did not hate his enemy. Would Krebb think a man like that was a thief?

"Th' sun's about gone," the old man said again, and now his face was pasty gray. His lips were pale. His eyes seemed not to see the things about him, to see only the past in which he'd lived.

"My life is going to end," Grady Curbo continued wearily. "And yours is going to start. I want to leave you no obligations, no hates or old quarrels to finish after I'm gone. Neither do I want to take a promise from you that might take you away from the path you think is right. Your life should be yours to do with as you think best. If you see a path down which you must travel, I want you to take it, knowing that I'm beside you."

The old man stopped. He looked at the black nose of Perdition Peak. He kept staring at it, smiling whimsically it seemed. Finally, Bud realized that Grady Curbo wasn't really seeing the peak.

He had died with the sight of the mountains he loved in his eyes.

CHAPTER TWO

War-Call for Nesters

SLOWLY, while a fifth wooden cross was being erected above a grave in the Curbo ranchyard, the moon, round, high and silver white, slid gracefully over Perdition Peak. Bud Curbo put the long-handled shovel away in the shed. He went to the porch, hunkered there and stared at the graves of his father, his three uncles, all dead because they were named Curbo. His mother, there beside them, killed by grief and shame.

His mind flew back to the things Grady Curbo had said about Roman Krebb; about his not being a murderer and a thief. But Krebb must be guilty. Who else would have killed the Curbo brothers? Who else would have stolen the skinny, ill-fed Curbo stock when heavy, well-fattened Krebb cattle were just across a wire fence?

Vivid as a picture in front of his eyes was the thing that had branded Grady as a rustler the night when he and his brothers had guarded a herd of five thousand cattle for Roman Krebb. Grady Curbo was just starting then, had just married. He was working part time for Krebb to get money to keep going while they built this ranch here in Crazy Hermit Basin.

The norther that had howled down from the hills, the snow that had come with it, and the storm that lasted for several days, Bud Curbo had heard about many times. How Grady and his brothers

had fought to stop the stampede when the lightning had flashed. How they had played out their horses following a gradually dimming trail when the rain and sleet had turned to snow. How they had fought the blizzard and biting cold, to finally return to Roman Krebb, to tell him that five thousand cattle had been lost, had vanished so completely that no trace could be found of them.

Roman Krebb had raged and accused the Curbo brothers of stealing his cattle. He'd said there was no such thing as five thousand cattle vanishing off the face of the earth. The Curbo brothers were thieves, according to Roman Krebb. He couldn't prove it, but for twenty years they had been branded as such.

Krebb fought Grady Curbo as he strove to build a ranch in the basin. And Grady Curbo had been patient, hoped that in some way he could prove that a Curbo didn't steal. But now old Grady was dead. And Bud guessed that Roman Krebb had killed them all. Maybe Krebb had thought he was right, had really believed that Grady Curbo and his brothers had stolen the cattle. But Bud knew that Grady hadn't rustled any cattle, never took anything that didn't belong to him. He guessed that he'd do things differently than Grady had done them. He'd fight Roman Krebb. He'd have the things that were rightfully his. He'd have water and grass from public land.

The pound of hoofs turned Bud Curbo's head about. A group of riders came across the basin, the light of the moon flashing white fire from the barrels of their rifles. Bud leaped up and slammed the door of the house shut behind him. He found two Winchesters in the darkness and leaned them against the wall beside a window. The riders came on, stopped near the corral, a line of black figures against the gray of the silver-misted sage.

A match flared for a moment out near the corral, and the brown face of Larkin, the man who had been with Frazier, showed in the darkness. A ball of fire soared through the air as a wad of oil-soaked rags was thrown toward the house, a comet that blazed and sputtered fiercely as it landed on the roof.

Bud cursed softly, raised a rifle and sent a shot at Larkin. He kept on shooting fast, blasting unexpected fire at the group out there who had expected to watch a house burn down about the ears of sleeping men, to shoot at them as they scurried forth in bewilderment.

Bud Curbo grinned savagely as he watched the havoc his shots caused. Horses screamed and reared and raced away in mad confusion. Men cursed. Guns blazed. Men tumbled to the ground and lay there, still black forms on the reddish, flame-lit sand. Smoke seeped down through the ceiling from the burning roof. The flames crackled and roared and danced in ghoulish glee, to make a mad background for the wild chaotic maelstrom of sound that rose from the ranchyard.

Smoke filled the room where Bud Curbo crouched. His head was bloody. His eyes were blinded. He coughed and groped his way through the smoke to a window at the back of the room. He crawled through the window, sank down in the brush and bellied away from the burning building.

The shots in front seemed muffled now by the smoke and roar of the flames. The shadows danced crazily about him as he creeped along up to a knoll.

He turned and watched the sparks that shot upward as the roof of the house crashed down. The riders behind the corral were grotesque shadows from which lances of flame leaped out as their guns still cracked. Then a wall of the house collapsed and the sparks shot upward again. The guns stopped, and a grim and final silence settled over the

valley as the flames died down and the red embers, there where the house had been, was one distorted red eye winking in the darkness.

THE pound of hoofs came to where Bud lay and he knew the riders had gone. He rose and went down to the corral. He looked at the ashes of the house, the smoke spiraling up into the moon-silvered sky. His lips made a straight gash across his bloody face as he saddled a horse and rode across the hills toward Junction.

It was a tiny town of one general store, a saloon and a blacksmith shop, where the nesters traded, preferring it to the Krebb owned town of San Saba, where, if they traded, all the money would go into Roman Krebb's bank; Roman Krebb, the man who had fenced the waterholes in Crazy Hermit Basin.

Bud Curbo rode up the main street, saw the horses and wagons, and realized that it was a shopping night for the nesters.

"What's happened to you, Bud?" asked Bert Lanning, a young nester, as Bud went into the saloon.

The saloon was crowded. Nesters, old, young, all hard-working honest men, whose ambitions had been ground down under the iron heel of Roman Krebb. Bud Curbo smiled that twisted smile again as he looked at them, as the room became quiet when they saw the blood on his head, his smoke-grimed face, the glint of fire in his eyes.

"The thing that happened to me is just what will happen to most of you," he said to them. "My father was killed. Our house was burned. I crawled away in the brush or I'd have been killed. Roman Krebb did it."

"What do you mean, it'll happen to us?" asked Bascomb, a grizzled, long-armed nester. "Krebb hasn't bothered me."

"It won't happen to you as long as you let Krebb run his whizzer on you," Bud said. "Let him slap you in the face. Let him starve your cattle and starve your families and he'll let you live in the basin. But show some fight and you'll get what we got.

"Roman Krebb has called the Curbos rustlers for twenty years. But he did that to cover his own stealing. He couldn't afford to let us get a foothold here. He killed my three uncles. He robbed us, starved our cattle, and still we didn't fight back. But today he threatened us with jail on a trumped up charge of rustling, and I killed Frazier. Tonight they burned us out. Krebb will do that to you too, if you show a sign of getting prosperous. That's what I meant, Bascomb. I think you'll all get what I got because I think you all have ambition. I don't think you'll be content to starve just because Roman Krebb says to do it. I think you'll try to get ahead, but when you do, watch out!"

They looked at one another, then at Bud.

"It looks to me like you're tryin' to talk somebody into fightin' your fight," said Jake Kirby.

Bud shrugged. "Lanning asked me a question and I answered it," he told them. "I'm starting a fight against Krebb. He'll whip me. Alone, I don't have a chance. But with you behind me we could whip him. We could have water and grass for cattle, and better food for your families. It looks to me as though it's as much your fight as mine."

"I say let's tear down Krebb's fences!" called out Bert Lanning. "He's hogged government water. It's ours as much as his!"

"You do and you'll start a war!" warned Bascomb. "Mebby we can whip him and maybe we can't. You can expect Lanning to throw in with Bud, for Bud is going to marry Lanning's sister. Per-

sonally, I'd rather move than to make a lot of widows in the basin."

"Well, I'm tired of moving," declared Treadwell, a young man with an old looking face. "I've been shoved around too much. I'm here to stay!"

"Me too!" emphatically declared another young nester.

"How about you, Creed?" Bud asked a tall man at the end of the bar.

Creed was a nester, but he was more prosperous than the others. His place was on the other side of the Peak. His cattle were not affected by the fences Krebb put about the water. Creed had always appeared war-like to Bud. He had men who looked like gunmen working for him.

"It doesn't affect me," he said. "For all it hurts me, Krebb could fence all the basin. I don't use it. But if I was in the basin I'd fight Krebb. I wouldn't have let him get away with what he has. I won't join you now, but rather than let him wipe you out I'll pitch in and help, with both money and guns. I'll do that in case it looks like Krebb is going to win. I guess that shows what side of the fence I'm on."

The young men nodded approval. The old men eyed Bud Curbo askance.

"I've lived through one range war," said Bascomb, "and I don't want in on another one. You talk the young hotheads into this with you, Curbo, and I'll do all in my power to make you sorry for it. I'll block you. If necessary I'll throw in with Krebb to keep death and destruction from spreading all over the basin!"

BUD CURBO stared at him, his lips curling disdainfully, his eyes flashing. The yellow rays of the oil lamps in the saloon played on his bloody head, darkened the lines twisting down from his curling lips.

"I didn't aim to make this an issue, Bascomb," he told the grizzled nester, coldly. "I told you the truth. You're a bunch of sheep. If you don't want to fight for what is yours, that's your business. I don't hanker to talk anybody into anything they don't want to do."

Bud smiled contemptuously at them, went out and led his horse up the street to the General Store. He bought shells for his rifle and pistols. He loaded his saddlebags with ammunition, then looked up and stared at Ann Lanning, Bert's sister, the girl he was engaged to marry. The illogical thought came to him that in order to marry her he must fight so that he would have a home to offer. But if he fought he would die. It was a fight he couldn't win.

"I've heard what was said at the saloon, Bud," she said earnestly. "I'm sorry about your father. But fighting Roman Krebb won't bring him back. Losing your life and causing other men to lose theirs won't help you or me or anyone. If you can sell your land I'll go away with you and we'll start all over somewhere."

Bud Curbo shook his head and wondered why he did. He was a fool to even think of fighting Krebb. But he knew he'd try. He knew, somehow, that inside of him was burning a fire so fierce that nothing could quench its flames. In the death of Grady Curbo, in the sight of that row of graves, in the flames of his burning home had been born a bulwark against all argument.

"There'd be another Roman Krebb wherever we went," he told her. "A man can't run away from himself. I'd be taking the fact with me that I'd run away from doing something I thought was right. Then I'd run away again, and keep on running. My father didn't fight, but he didn't run. It wasn't because he was afraid that he didn't fight. It was because he wasn't convinced that it was right. But just before he died I think he tried to tell me that maybe he was wrong. I believe if the bullet that hit him hadn't killed

him he'd be riding to fight beside me now. I believe my uncles would be with me."

"You, alone, are going to try to fight Roman Krebb?" asked Ann Lanning incredulously. "You'd do that, knowing that perhaps your fight will eventually stir the young men up to fight with you? You'd make a war out of a personal feud?"

Bud Curbo shook his head discouragedly. "You don't understand it," he told the girl. "I don't wish to drag anybody into the fight. But I can't understand men who wear another man's collar and not fret at where it chafes them. All I know is that I can't take the law Roman Krebb lays down. I'm going to fight him. I guess I'd do it if it meant all the wars in the world."

Ann Lanning's eyes glinted with anger as she stared at him.

"I'll hate you if you drag my brother into it, Bud," she told him. "You and I are through if that happens."

She turned and moved away, and Bud Curbo watched her vanish in the darkness of the ill-lit street. He smiled bitterly and mounted his horse. He rode out of town and across the hills toward Krebb's range and wondered if the ghosts of his dead back there at the Curbo ranch were riding beside him; if perhaps their spirits, long held in subjection by Roman Krebb, had at last arisen to fight for their rights. Somehow, he felt as he rode along, that that was true. His father had said, "Whatever path you choose, I will be beside you."

Down below him now, glinting in the light of the moon, were the shining strands of Krebb's wire. From off in the distance sounded the discontented bawl of starving cattle—his own and the nesters'.

He rode down the slope and came to a fenced water hole. He pulled wire cutters from his saddlebags, clipped the wire and listened to the rush of hoofs as the cattle pushed toward the water. The wire cutters clipped again. Bud's rope snaked out and snagged a post, and he jerked it out of the way of the crowding cattle. He tore Roman Krebb's fence all to hell and grinned again savagely. This night thirsty cattle would drink!

On then to the next tank Bud rode. His wire cutters snipped wire again. The cattle crowded forward. The posts snapped as he roped them, snaked them away.

He came to the south pasture where Krebb had fenced a whole range, well grassed, spotted with water holes. He listened to the sing of the wire as he snipped it, knew that now, on this long wire fence, the sound would carry the length of the wire to Roman Krebb's line camp.

The cattle crowded through as Bud pulled the fence away. Their bawling stopped as they reached the grass and water. The wire cutters snipped again, and the posts snapped as Bud Curbo roped them.

The thunder of hoofs came to Bud's ears as he worked. He sheathed his wire cutters. Then the crash of guns broke suddenly into the hoof thunder. A bullet through Bud's side and he whirled his horse about and raced away, the world swimming in his eyes, dizzy, faint, realizing bitterly how ineffectual his fight would be.

CHAPTER THREE

Cut That Fence!

RACING along toward the graying eastern sky, Bud Curbo swayed uncertainly in the saddle. He twisted his head about and looked behind him, saw that the Krebb riders were losing ground.

Bud climbed into the Crazy Hermit Hills, stared with widening eyes at a sudden burst of red flame that shot into the

sky. He raced his horse forward again. A house was burning. Bert and Ann Lanning's house!

A picture of the horsemen who had lined up in front of the Curbo cabin came into Bud's eyes as he raced along. Krebb, enraged at Bud's attempt to incite the nesters, was teaching them a lesson, was firing Ann Lanning's home!

Four dark figures raced away from the vicinity of the flaming building as Bud topped a rise. He saw Ann and Bert run from the building. Then he turned his horse and raced after the riders, whipping his carbine from its saddle boot.

He lost them in the hills, but rode on, grimly determined, bloody, cursing Krebb, cursing his own inefficiency. The rattle of hoofs on stone came to his ears and he pushed his horse into the brush. Creed, the nester, and his three stone-faced men, came down the trail. Bud frowned, stared at them puzzled. What was Creed doing here?

Bud's horse neighed and he pushed out from the brush and faced them, his rifle in his hands, his eyes staring at them suspiciously in the murky gloom of early dawn.

"Bud!" exclaimed Creed. "What th' hell!"

"That's what I might say, Creed," Bud said coldly. "What th' hell? Who fired the Lanning place? What are you doing here?"

Creed stared hard at Bud, then smiled.

"I'm glad to tell you that," he said. "We were coming back from Junction and saw the flames. We hurried there and five men run away. We took after them and lost them. We circled, then you pop up."

Bud tried hard not to believe Creed. But Creed had no reason to fire a nester cabin. Creed was a nester. He'd offered to help in a fight against Krebb.

"You don't happen to think I had anything to do with that fire, do you?" Creed asked, a little coolness stealing into his voice.

Bud shook his head. "No," he said. "I don't. I'm all wrought up and jump at conclusions. Forget the way I act, Creed."

Creed waved the apology away. "We'll ride on and see if we can locate those riders," he said. "You see about Ann and Bert. And you look as though you need some patching up yourself."

Bud watched them leave, then rode down to the cabin. Ann, a little horror creeping into her eyes, stared at the new blood on Bud's shirt.

"You win, Bud," Bert Lanning said bitterly as Bud rode up. "Krebb doesn't know it, but this is the spark that will put the nesters on your side. The young fellows will be with you, anyway. I'll meet you tonight near your place with everybody that will fight. From now on Krebb will know he has something on his hands!"

Ann started to argue, but Bert waved her to silence. "Go over to Ma Bascomb, Ann," he told her. "Th' time for talk is over. It's time for action!"

The girl climbed on the horse her brother got for her. She sat there for a moment and stared at Bud. "You think you're right," she told him. "I know that. But someday, when it's too late, you'll discover you were wrong. When it's too late to bring the dead back to life, and when there's no hope of having peace, you'll pray for it, and you won't be able to get it, Bud."

Grim-faced and moody-eyed, Bud Curbo watched her ride away, and wondered if she was right. Perhaps this wild, savage thing that burned in him was wrong. Perhaps, if he could leave, with her, they would be happy, and he could forget that he had been a coward in running away. He tried to open his mouth to stop her, but he couldn't make the words come. Somehow, the ghosts of his dead were there beside him, making him know that

he'd go on till he could continue no more.

"Last night I told all the nesters what we could do if they joined in a fight against Roman Krebb," Bud said to Bert Lanning. "I still think it's the right thing to do. But I think *all* the nesters should do it. If they all took up for their rights, Krebb wouldn't fight. He'd know he'd be licked before he started. But with just a few of us, with just the young men, it might be a losing fight. You'll have your own folks against you. You'll be cursed for fools. You better think twice, Bert."

"Are you going to fight?" asked Bert Lanning.

Bud nodded and knew what Lanning would say.

"Then there'll be men beside you," he said. "I'll guarantee that!"

HE leaped on a horse and galloped away. Bud Curbo leaned tiredly against the side of his horse as he stood there, watching the dust rise up behind Bert Lanning's horse. The grim thought of war tormented him as his side ached and his head spun.

He tried to think of an argument against this thing he was doing, and he could not. Roman Krebb was a murderer. He had murdered Bud's three uncles, the three brothers of his father. He was a thief. He had stolen Curbo cattle. He was a liar when he claimed that Grady Curbo was a rustler. There was only one argument to use against a man like Krebb, and that was the argument of force.

Bud Curbo mounted and rode away into the hills. He stared with red-rimmed eyes down at the place where two homes had been, his own and Bert Lanning's. He stared broodingly at the ranchyard where the row of graves was a tiny line of dots in his eyes. The sun soared across the sky and purpled the peak of Perdition as it sank low and became red, as though with the blood that would be shed in a war to come.

A grim dark line of riders came across the hills and Bud rode down to meet them. Twelve young men, Bert Lanning at their head, met him on the flats.

"We're ready," said Lanning.

"You've thought it all out?" Bud asked. "You won't regret it?"

They all shook their heads as they stared back at him. Bud turned and led the way across the flats, through the shadows that preceded them toward Krebb's range. Darkness fell down from the hills, and the soft rumble of their horse's hoofs was a grim and sinister sound in the night.

"We'll take all of Krebb's fences tonight," Bud told them as they moved forward. "Both from the range and water holes. If they come we'll fight them till we've done our job. If Krebb puts the fences up again we'll tear them down as fast as he puts them up."

A low growl of assent came from behind him. They came to the fence and Bud Curbo's cutters sang their shrill defiant song in the night. The posts snapped as ropes snaked out and tore them down. The shining wire curled on the ground as an endless snake might writhe in agony. The distant mutter of hoofs came faintly in the night and the glint of rifle barrels showed there among the men as they unsheathed their guns.

On down the line of fence they worked, ready to fight. The crash of a gun roused the night to shuddering echoes. A man yelled. The nester rifles snarled their answer back at the Krebb guns. The posts still snapped as the ropes pulled them back with a jerk. The wire cutters still made that tiny, singing, spiteful sound between the roaring crash of guns.

The Krebb riders out their in the shadows stopped and Bud Curbo grinned savagely again. They were surprised, those Krebb men! They had expected only Bud Curbo to be here, and had found a group of desperate youths whose guns

blazed raucous defiance at the Krebb attack. Young men whose eyes glinted along gleaming rifle barrels, whose sense of justice and right had been outraged till they could stand no more, stood fast and fought like veterans.

The Krebb men fell back. The gun flashes were orange streaks in the darkness. The wire cutters stopped. The nesters mounted. Bud Curbo looked about him and saw three men, wounded, being helped into their saddles. His heart grew could as he looked at them, at the white, set faces of the young men who rode swiftly beside him. These men were badly hit. He swore savagely and rode on.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hangnoose Revelation

UP into the hills, Bud Curbo led them. He stopped and watched with an uneasy coldness coming over him as they unloaded the wounded from the horses. He looked at their whitened faces, at the set and staring expression in their eyes as they started the grim task of doctoring.

The night was still and a coyote wailed. Nobody spoke, but many a pair of accusing eyes stared at Bud Curbo as he hunkered there in the night, watching these shocked youngsters who realized just now how grim and horrible war could be.

A crimson flame shot suddenly into the sky far off to the north. It rose up high and glaring red. A boy beside Bud muttered a bitter curse under his breath. Another nester house was burning.

"That's my place," said Treadwell. Then he damned Roman Krebb, a world of icy bitterness in his voice.

Bud Curbo hunkered there and watched, and knew that this was the show-down. They had struck and Krebb was striking back. War at its worst would rise like the flames of the burning house yonder, to engulf all in its path. The gray streaks of dawn dirtied the sky before they had finished ministering the hurt. Then they mounted again, and rode down onto the flats, grim, silent, white-faced, but keeping their word not to turn back.

A rider came suddenly around the base of the hill ahead of them. A boy yelled behind Bud Curbo. The horses leaped forward in a furious charge as the rage-filled nesters saw the horseman to be Roman Krebb. Roman Krebb, alone!

He waited for them. He was unarmed. He was old, and his white hair gleamed like a silver mane in the early light as a rope whirled his hat from his head as it settled about his neck. His head was high and a defiant light sprang into his eyes as they pulled him off the horse. He said no word, but stared at Bud as they bound his hands behind him. They led him to a cotton-wood tree that stood like a lone sentinel at a place on the range where a wire fence once had been.

"You're going to die, or come to terms!" said young Treadwell. "We're going to hang you or get an agreement from you that Crazy Hermit Basin will be free, as it should be. We'll get water and grass or you'll stretch a rope. Which will it be, Krebb?"

Roman Krebb still held his head high. No light of fear came into his eyes. He was cool, calm. He smiled loftily, contemptously, as he stared at Bud Curbo.

"You've arrayed yourselves with a thief," he told them. "You're acting like common thugs and murderers. Are you going to let this man drag you down to his level?"

"We've arrayed ourselves with nobody," said Treadwell. "We've banded together against you, to get our just due, to pay you for burned homes and dead cattle."

Roman Krebb looked levelly at them. "I've never burned a nester home," he said evenly. "My men burned the Curbo place, but they did that without my or-

ders. They flew off the handle when Bud Curbo killed Frazier. The fires since then were not started by my men. You can take my word for that."

One of the nester youths laughed. "Your word!" he said. "If you didn't burn them, who did then?"

Roman Krebb smiled, looked at Bud Curbo. "I wouldn't know," he said. "But I do know that Krebb men didn't do it. If I had cared about a nester in the basin I could have chased you all out years ago. I could have stopped you before you got started. I wouldn't have had to wait five years to burn you out. I could have done it before you had yours houses up!"

Roman Krebb's eyes flashed as he looked about him. His voice rang with sincerity. His words carried the ring of truth.

Bud Curbo knew the men were listening to him, maybe hoping that they could believe him.

"I fenced the basin against Grady Curbo," Krebb went on. "He stole five thousand cattle from me, then had the nerve to stay here and live as my neighbor! I couldn't prove his guilt then, but I swore I'd do everything in my power that I could to drive him out.

"I still swear that. I'll put up fences as fast as you can tear them down, as long as a Curbo is in the valley. Even if you hang me it will still be the same. The fences will go up again. My estate will go to my men, as long as they do as my will specifies, and it specifies that the fences stay up as long as a Curbo is here.

"If you want water and grass, and want it badly enough to murder for it, drive Bud Curbo out of the basin! When he's gone I'll take down my fences. If he leaves I'll write an agreement to share water and range, as all good cowmen should do. I hate a hog as bad as you hate one. But I'll make no concession as long as a thieving Curbo is here. If he stays, gentlemen, hang me and be damned!"

THEY were silent. They were impressed. They looked at Bud Curbo and he had no answer for them. They looked at Krebb and his head was still high, his eyes still unafraid, his lips still curling with disdain as he stared at Bud.

"Throw the rope over the limb," said Treadwell a bit uneasily. "I don't reckon we'll turn on the man we've fought beside!"

The rope went up like a slender snake, dropped down again. A hand reached up and tightened it a little. Roman Krebb's eyes still glinted with that contemptuous fire as he stared at Bud Curbo. Something inside Bud's head seemed to be hammering at his brain. His head seemed filled with a thousand conflicting thoughts —his father's words, saying he could not believe Krebb to be a thief and a murderer. Krebb did not talk like one, did not act like one. And the words of Ann Lanning: "When it's too late," rang in his brain. And that taunt in Roman Krebb's eyes now as he stared at Bud, as though asking him if he was man enough to stop a war if he had guts enough to ride away and save an entire community from destruction.

"Pull him up," said Treadwell huskily, his face white.

"Wait!" cried Bud Curbo.

The rope slackened. The nesters looked at him.

"Take the rope off of his neck." Bud told them. "Let him go. I'm pulling out. Get your agreement from him to share grass and water. I'll never be back."

Bud turned and rode away. He smiled bitterly as he heard no remonstrance behind him. They were glad he was going. They were sick of war. They'd have gone ahead and hung Krebb, but they were glad they didn't have to. And somehow, Bud Curbo was glad they weren't going to hang him. He, too, felt a little sick. He was tired and weak and embittered.

As he rode along he looked across the

valley toward Perdition Peak, near where his father had built his home, where he had died. It was hard to give all this up, this place where he had been born, the only home he had ever known, and the hope of happiness with the girl he loved. But maybe she was right. Maybe the old man was right.

Bud Curbo's pony loped slowly through the hills. He passed the country south of Krebb's place, where Grady Curbo and his brothers had been guarding the cattle Krebb claimed were stolen so many years ago. He cut down into a valley and the wind from the north chilled him. He looked at the sky and it was gray. An early norther was howling down through the Terlinguas, to make their dog-nosed muzzles black and forbidding as he passed them.

The trail twisted through a deceptively shallow arroyo and entered a brown stretch of malpai. Then it faded out. Bud reached the hills ahead and began to climb.

The wind cut him like a knife and he shivered. He rode close to a canyon edge and stopped suddenly as he glimpsed an opening in the wall. He turned his horse into it, hoping for shelter against the the cutting wind. Suddenly, he stared ahead of him, into a vast, sheer canyon, at the glistening white bones of thousands of cattle, at the long horns of the breed owned by Roman Krebb twenty years ago, when Grady Curbo had worked for him.

Bud stood there, dismounted from his horse, like a man turned to stone, as he suddenly realized that here was the answer to the vanished herd! Here was proof that old Grady Curbo had not been a thief! Here was where five thousand cattle, fleeing from a storm, had fallen hundreds of feet into this blind, almost well-like canyon, so remote, so well hidden and obscure, that their bones had never been found!

CHAPTER FIVE

Lesson in Gunsmoke

BUD CURBO'S heart hammered hard in his breast. His eyes glowed and he smiled softly. He wished that old Grady Curbo could have lived to have seen this sight, to have known for a surety that his name was clean, to know that now all the other accusations of rustling would be branded as lies. All the accusations of Roman Krebb would be laughed at, ridiculed!

Bud mounted, rode out of the crack in the wall and into the wind again. It was cold, biting and sharp. But now Bud Curbo was not cold. Swiftly, he climbed up onto the flats again, then stopped as he saw a great herd of cattle moving toward him. He slipped back into the brush and stared in surprise as the first of the cattle started past him. He frowned as he saw that there were cattle with Roman Krebb's brand on them, cattle with the Curbo brand, cattle from a nester spread!

Bud switched his gaze back to the men who drove the cattle on. It was Creed and two men, Root and Fargo. And Bud Curbo suddenly knew the answer to everything. He knew who had killed his uncles, his father's three brothers. He knew who had stolen Roman Krebb's cattle and his own cattle for these past five years. He knew who had burned the Lanning cabin so Roman Krebb would be blamed for it. He knew why Creed had talked war, yet refused to join in it.

Creed wanted war so he could strip the range! Creed had stolen Krebb cattle, knowing it would be blamed on the Curbos, had stolen Curbo cattle, knowing it would be blamed on Krebb! Creed had killed the Curbo brothers when they'd caught him at his work! Creed had burned the Lanning place and the Treadwell place!

Suddenly Bud Curbo knew he had to do the impossible. He had to prove all this to Roman Krebb and the nesters. If he could do that, if he could show them the bones of the cattle, show them the proof of Creed's guilt, another cabin could rise up from where the old Curbo cabin had burned. A new home, with Ann Lanning as its mistress, could be built over the ashes of the old, a new happiness and understanding could fill the Basin.

Bud jumped his horse forward, out in front of the cattle and started them milling. Back behind the cattle Creed raced his horse forward, then stopped and threw a rifle to his shoulder. He shot, and the bullet cracked with startling sound past Bud. Root and Fargo thundered down the opposite side of the herd, guns in their hands.

The bullets whistled and cracked. Bud threws his rifle to his shoulder and shot at Creed. Bud's nervous horse pranced and he missed. He dismounted and flattened himself behind a nest of boulders.

As the herd moved by his gun came up and he started to shoot into the leaders of the cattle, to head them back the way they had come.

He shot at Fargo and saw him fall, but it was only Fargo's horse that was down. Fargo was unhurt, for his gun flamed and a hot bullet stung Bud's side and made him wince.

The cattle were on the move now, racing thunderously back toward Krebb range. The thunder of their hoofs was a loud and welcome sound to Bub Curbo's ears. His gun crashed again and again as Creed, Fargo, and Root came on, trying to kill him. Bullets, like hornets, whistled shrilly past him now. They struck him and pounded him backward, like unseen hands smashing at him. But he kept on fighting, kept on shooting.

He saw Root die and grinned. He heard Fargo scream and saw him fall down to the ground. But he knew he wouldn't last, couldn't last. He knew, finally, that no matter how important it was that he win, that he would lose this fight. They would find his bones, or perhaps never find them, as they'd never found the bones of the cattle. There would still be that suspicion of taint on the Curbo name. Only Bud Curbo and Grady Curbo perhaps, who had died in his faith, trusting that the Curbo name would be cleared, would know that the Curbos were not thieves.

The bullets came faster and thicker now as Creed worked toward him. Bud's eyes were blinded with blood and he wiped it away with a shaky, uncertain hand. He grew weak and had to lower his guns so he could rest his arms. It was hard for him to know just what was going on, and it seemed that there were other noises out there, that horse's hoofs were thundering and men were yelling and guns were crashing, all in a mad maelstrom of sound. And he knew that could not be, for he was alone, with only Creed out there before him.

BUT Bud wasn't sure of anything much now. He was pretty well done up, he knew. His vision, even when the blood wasn't in his eyes, played tricks on him. He saw many horsemen when he knew there was only one. He heard noises that did not exist. He knew he was done, and whished that Ann, above all others, could know the truth. He hoped that the nesters would prosper and have now the things they had always been denied. He tried futilely to raise a gun again, but he was too weak. He looked at some dim forms of men that gathered about him, but his eyes were too full of blood to see them. He cursed them coldly, softly, viciously, for dirty murderers and rustlers.

"Come on, Creed," he said huskily, weakly. "You win. Finish me. But someday Roman Krebb will catch you. Someday he and everybody will know that the

Curbos were as honest as any man. They'll know you're a dirty, sneakin' thief. He'll—"

"He knows most of that already," said a voice at Bud Curbo's side.

Bud wiped the blood out of his eyes and looked very dazedly about him. He saw Roman Krebb and about ten of Roman Krebb's riders. He wondered if they were real and knew they must be, for the guns were stopped and Creed, not far away, lay dead on his face.

"I didn't think a Curbo could tell the truth," Krebb said apologetically. "I didn't think you'd keep your word and leave, so I got some men and followed you to make you leave. I thought I'd have to force a Curbo to keep his word. I guess that's one thing I'll have to apologize for."

Bud Curbo smiled bitterly. He told Krebb of the hidden canyon. . . .

"When you take a look at that," he finished. "I think there'll be something else to apologize for, Krebb!"

Roman Krebb ran his horse down into the canyon. Bud Curbo smiled as he listened to Krebb coming back, hurriedly, racing his horse. Bud envisioned a home that he had been willing to leave to bring peace to the Basin. He visualized the flowers that would grow about the porch, and the grave in the yard where an old man rested whose faith had at last been justified. And somehow Bud guessed that old Grady had known that someday his name would be clean, for he had died with no bitterness, no hatred toward those who had persecuted him.

"It looks," said Roman Krebb contritely as he came back again, "as though I've got a lot of things to apologize for, Bud. I have a lot of things to be sorry about and a lot of mistakes to make up. And I want to pay for everything. Help Bud easy, fellows. Take him to my house. He'll stay there while we pitch in and build a few new houses in the Basin!"

Bud Curbo smiled as they lifted him up carefully from the ground. A new deal was coming to Crazy Hermit Basin. A new spirit was entering the hearts of its men—the spirit of coöperation, replacing hatred and distrust.

THE END

STRAIGHT-SHOOTING TINHORN!

"Never try for vengeance against a dead man," they warned Square Jack Scarlett. But that silent, iron-hard gambler was used to playing out his own hand—though strangely, the two he loved, and three he hated, must bring both himself and the town he ruled to red ruin!

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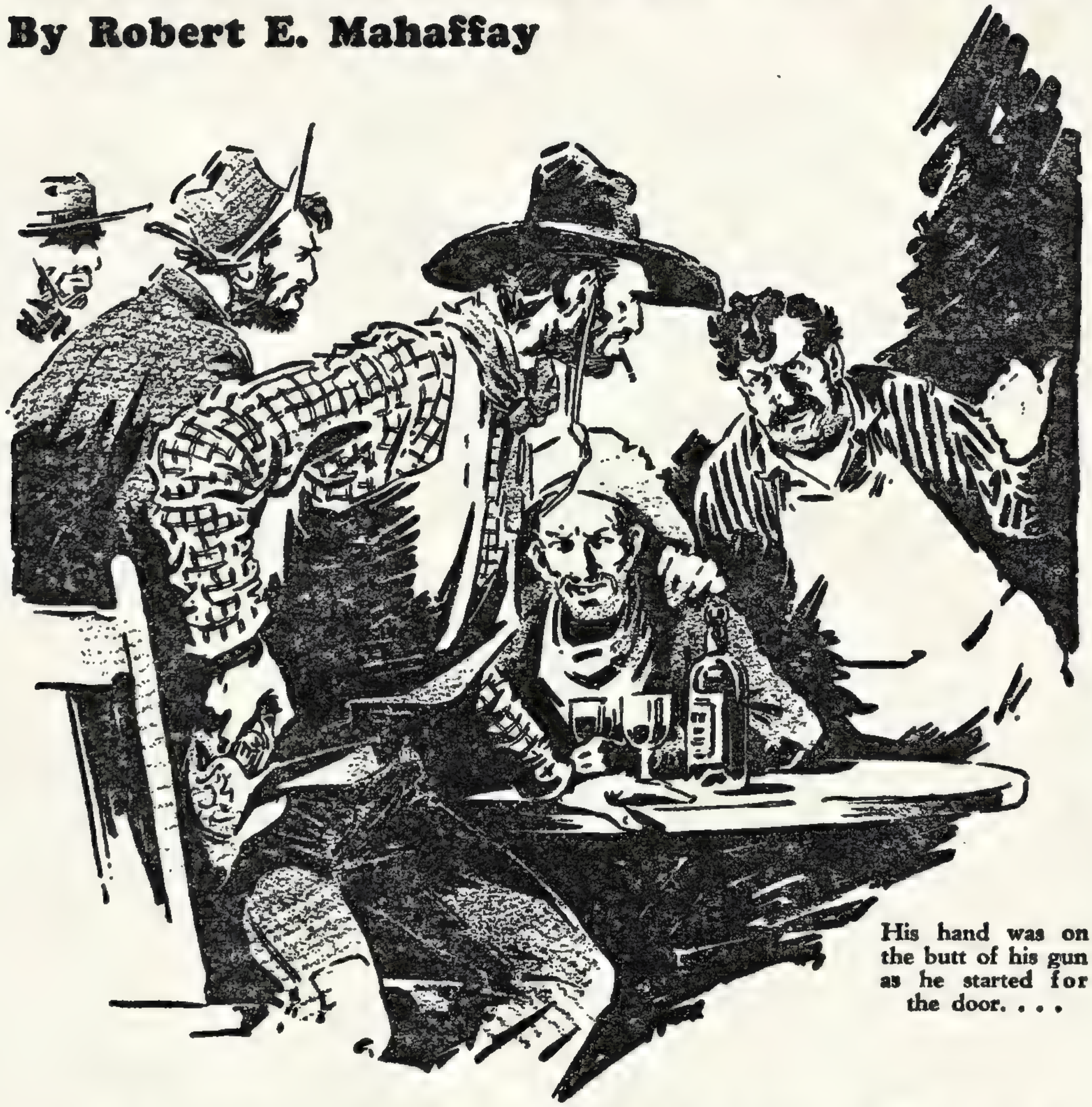
Deacon Bottle--Sixgun God-Father

By Robert E. Mahaffay



His hand was on the butt of his gun as he started for the door. . . .

Lovable, harried Deacon Bottle knew he'd have to give up the younaster who had won his heart as a frontier orphan waif, for Little Rip was heir to half the rich mines in the Blue Rock . . . But the Deacon figured that Rip would still need him as a sixgun god-father when he went to his new home in the camp that had a hangnoose all ready for the Deacon's neck!

FOR more than a week the storm had bombarded the Montana hills with steady fury. It had brought havoc to many of the communities lying in the valleys, and it had brought catastrophe to Deacon Bottle.

With daylight fading around him, the Deacon plodded grimly toward the ridge beyond which lay the mining town of Blue Rock. The knowledge that he had to reach that town before dark drove him along, lashing on muscles that it seemed must long ago have quit functioning. Failure to make it would mean that ten-year-old little Rip Carson would lose his leg, and maybe his life.

The boy's weight was like a stone in the Deacon's arms.

The accident had happened with swift ruthlessness. A crumbling cut-bank. The boy's horse thrown off into a wash which held a raging, howling flood. The Deacon had run downstream, pushed his big black gelding into swimming water. Both horses with their packs had been lost, but Deacon Bottle had got Rip out, though one of the lad's legs had been badly crushed and torn. That had been six hours ago.

THE Deacon stumbled along the water-gashed trail which angled up the side of a draw, flanked by pines which wrestled madly and ceaselessly with the wind. Thunder was a rumbling menace behind him. Rain ran in a blinding sheet along the draw, whipping the Deacon's bowed back, scrubbing like a steel brush at the yellow mud which stained him to the knees. His low-crowned black hat was gone. One sleeve of his frock coat had been ripped away at the elbow.

The Deacon's plump face was a queer gray color, harsh with lines of exertion and strain. This, he thought, was Rip's homecoming. The scant two weeks which had passed since he had left Latigo seemed like two weary decades. Each day had meant that he was closer to losing Rip. And when golden-haired little Rip Carson was gone, something would be torn out of the Deacon's heart and out of his life.

But he had to give Rip up. He understood that. Staggering up that wretched trail toward the ridge, he told himself over and over again, fiercely, that it was for the boy's own good. When he had adopted Rip, more than a year ago, the boy had needed him. But that crisis was past, and it was time for Rip Carson to claim his heritage.

The boy's life would have to split off from the Deacon's. Rip Carson was rich. Rip Carson was the legal owner of half the mines in Blue Rock.

Deacon Bottle had known that when he took the youngster in order to erase from his mind the bleak memory of violence and heartbreak. He had known, too, how dangerous the move was.

Rip Carson, kidnapped eight years before, might very well put a hang-rope around the neck of the man who brought him back to Blue Rock. That man, in order to avoid suspicion, would have to be above reproach, and the Deacon—called gunman, fradulent man-of-God, and drunkard—was not.

The Deacon's lungs were laboring. His throat was rubbed raw with each stabbing breath. The rain, flogged on by the booming wind, hissed at his bare head and beat against his back.

Unaware that his climb was ended, Deacon Bottle stumbled. The trail had leveled off. In the valley on the further side of the ridge, lights were beginning to blink through the merciless downpour.

"See?" exclaimed the Deacon hoarsely. "Down there, Rip? That's Blue Rock. That's where you were born."

The boy stirred in his arms. "I could maybe walk a little now," he whispered. "My leg's fine. It's feelin' fine."

Deacon Bottle, knowing the shape that leg was in, shook his head. "Nope," he rejected, trying to make his voice sound easy. "You don't weigh much more'n a fistful of cartridges, anyhow. Couple of crow-hops more an' we'll be there."

But he hesitated for a moment more, the air rasping in his lungs. He hadn't meant to have it happen this way. The return of Rip, he had known, would take arranging.

He had meant to leave Rip in the hills while he went down, found Rip's only living relative, an uncle, Dawson Lane. He had had letters from Sheriff Enoch Starling of Latigo to show Lane. Letters that would establish his motive and backing by the law, and explain how he had found Rip.

Those letters had been lost with the

horses and packs. And Rip couldn't wait. Rip had to get down there to a doctor, now, regardless of what happened to the Deacon for bringing him.

Like a worn-out automaton he began to plod down into the valley.

Through the shimmering rain curtain, over beyond the town, he could see the river. It was a swollen, froth-whipped band pouring down from the further hills. It hammered against the neck of land on which the town lay, turned at a sharp angle to beat against a rocky cliff, turned again to go foaming and raging away through a gap at the lower end of the pocket.

He could hear the savage roar of it as he stumbled down into Blue Rock's main street. The street was a welter of mud with a knee-deep stream running down the middle. Men splashed through it, hurrying in the deepening dusk. Where they were going or what they were doing the Deacon didn't know.

Ignored, he stood between the rain-battered lines of building fronts, staggering from exhaustion, every sinew in his ample body sapped of energy. He shouted, but men running past him didn't stop.

OVER the walk was a building with a hotel sign plastered across its front. He slipped and plowed to it, put a big shoulder against the door and lurched inside. He stood there, squinting through water which dripped from his forehead.

The lobby was deserted except for the clerk who, in a shirt damp under the arms with perspiration, was hastily tugging papers and parcels from the opened safe and piling them on the desk.

"Have you got any kind of a place," began the Deacon jerkily, "where this boy—"

The thin-faced clerk flung him a quick, angry look. "Sure there's rooms. Nothin' but rooms. Only a crazy man'd go into one of 'em, though!"

Deacon Bottle stared, uncomprehending, and the clerk cried, "The river, you damn fool! Chances are it's goin' to bust smack through this town!"

"It ain't here yet," said the Deacon grimly. "I got to have a doctor for this boy. He's in mighty bad shape. Where can I find one?"

"Don't ask me." This time the clerk didn't even look up.

The next thing he knew, Deacon Bottle had put Rip down in one of the shabby leather chairs and was reaching across the counter. The clerk, his shoulders nearly pulverized between two pudgy hands, was dragged like an empty suit of clothes across the counter.

"I told you this boy's in bad shape! Get me a doctor!"

"Damn it," the clerk squawled, "those papers are valuable. I can't run off an'—"

"I'll watch 'em. When you show up here with a sawbones, you can have 'em back."

The clerk began a yelp of wrathful protest, saw one of the Deacon's fists slide promptly to a silver-mounted gun butt, and turned and scuttled out.

Deacon Bottle went back to Rip Carson. The boy was holding with both hands to the arms of the chair, but he tried to grin at the Deacon. Always thin, he looked more fragile than ever now. His raggedly-cut golden hair was plastered across his wet forehead. From beneath it hazel eyes stared upward, filled with confidence and pride and the effort it took to hold back an expression of pain.

Deacon Bottle touched the boy's shoulder gently, almost wistfully. "Not much longer, Rip. How's it feel?"

"Not so bad—as it did." The lad's voice faded. He whispered, "Gosh, Deacon, I can't hardly keep—my eyes open."

It was a combination of exposure and exhaustion. Deacon Bottle murmured, "Sure, Rip. Catch a wink or so 'fore the doc gets here."

Somewhere behind the Deacon a door slammed. He looked up expectantly, then frowned. A saloon lay next to the hotel. An opening had been cut through from the lobby, and drapes hung to partially shield it. Two men had tramped into the saloon from the rear.

There was the clink of glasses, then voices:

"I did the best I could. I tell you, Lane, nobody could be sure."

"I've got to be sure!"

"I was behind 'em every foot of the way from Latigo."

"Five miles behind 'em!" came the snapping retort.

"As close as you'd have been. That Deacon's poison with an iron. Anyhow, I saw the kid take his spill. The Deacon went in after him. It didn't look to me like either of 'em had a prayer of comin' out alive."

The Deacon edged closer, keeping concealed behind the curtains, yet through a split in one of them, he was able to see into the barroom. A big man in a checked shirt was busy talking with another man at a table. Lane, he guessed, was the name of the man who was doing the questioning.

Now angrily, he snapped, "But you don't *know!*"

"Well, I don't *reckon* they come out alive," Lane's companion was saying. "I circled downstream and found their broncs. Drowned. My hunch is that their bodies will show up down in Idaho, if they show up at all."

Footprints sounded, and the bartender came over to the table. The Deacon saw the stout barman gesture with a thumb toward the sleazy portiers behind which he was standing.

". . . . seen 'em when they come in," said the barman. "A kid and this big, husky lookin' gent. Somethin' was the matter with the kid. For all I know, they're still there now. . . . "

He broke off, for Lane had shoved to his feet, with a catlike movement. Lane's hand was on the butt of his gun as he started toward the door between the bar and the hotel.

Rip Carson stirred a little and muttered in his restless half-sleep. For all his bulk, the Deacon moved fast and almost silently. He was across the lobby, and had resumed his place at little Rip's side when Lane had moved into the opening between the drapes.

He was big and strongly built. Hair like black wire curled in short lengths back from his blunt forehead. He had a blue-shaven, bulldog jaw which he evidently took some pride in, for it was thrust continually forward. The glance from his greenish eyes was a thing of shrewdness and power.

There was a queer feeling in the Deacon's belly, now that the moment had come. The description he had carefully sought on his way to Blue Rock tallied.

He said huskily, "Lane? Dawson Lane?"

DAWSON LANE came with a curt stride across the lobby. There was something relentless about the way he looked at the Deacon and at the boy.

"And who the hell are you?"

Though he was certain Dawson Lane knew, the Deacon stammered awkwardly, "Me, I'm Deacon Bottle. This youngster—he's the Blue Rock kid."

"Has he got the marks?" Lane's heavy jaw clipped the words short.

He meant the three moles arranged in an identifying triangle on Rip Carson's back, and the Deacon nodded. "He's got 'em. There can't be any mistake. Right now, though, he's hurt. There's a doctor comin'." Deacon Bottle hurried on eagerly. "I'd like mighty well to have a talk with you. Rip, he's had a pretty tough time of it—that's why I kept him as long as I did. So's to pull him out of it,

if I could. I can tell you what Rip's been used to, an' what he likes, an' how to sort of coax him along to get the best out of him. Since—since he's been livin' with me—hell, Mister Lane, nothin' in the world means quite so much to me as this little feller."

It was a plea. A plea that a place be retained for him, the Deacon. A plea that little Rip Carson still needed him.

Dawson Lane said shortly, "I'll decide what's good for the boy from now on."

"Sure. Sure. You're all the family he's got. Only I was kind of hopin' I'd get to stay with him—maybe for a little while—"

Lane stared him down coldly. "You're lucky," he said between his teeth, "I'm giving you a chance to clear out of here, now, without a bullet under your dirty hide."

Savage warning was in his eyes. Doubt swelled into the Deacon's mind. He tried to stifle it by thinking of all the hatred and helpless anger which had been let loose after Rip's kidnapping. He couldn't blame Dawson Lane. And yet—

The Deacon stood there, one sleeve of his coat torn away, shabby and mud-stained, his weary cheeks dark with unshaven beard. "I wouldn't want to leave," he said slowly, "till I was sure about Rip gettin' the right kind of a break."

A movement in the opening leading to the saloon caught his eye. The man standing there, watching the scene in the lobby, was shorter than Lane. He was Indian-dark and his jaw, broken at some time or other, was strangely twisted.

Sight of him sent one of the Deacon's pudgy hands dropping to his side. Cable, he had learned the man's name was. Cable, in company with another, had tried to steal the valuable Blue Rock kid from the Deacon in Latigo. It was Cable, then, who had been talking to Lane, who had trailed them all the way from Latigo.

Deacon Bottle's lurking doubt strengthened. If Cable had been sent and paid by Dawson Lane— With the boy out of the way, Lane would be sole owner of the Blue Rock fortune!

"Keep your hand off that gun, Deacon," came Dawson Lane's voice, "or I'll blow a hole through you!"

Deacon Bottle swung his head. A six-gun had materialized in Dawson Lane's hand. It was leveled on his middle.

"It's your last chance, Deacon! Get out of here and out of this country!"

"If it's the reward," said Deacon Bottle thickly, "I don't want it. That isn't why I brought Rip back."

"No, you're smarter than that. You figure you've got a strong enough hold on the kid to get anything you want out of him!"

Deacon Bottle listened to the rain thrumming like buckshot against the hotel's front. He thought he could hear the undertone of the river's mad battle-roar.

There was sweat on his forehead, running down into his blue eyes. "That's wrong," he said. "I told you what Rip means to me." His voice was shaking a little. "You're either going to give Rip a square deal or you aren't. If you pull that trigger I'll know you don't figure to. You'll get me, maybe, but I'll kill you before I die!"

Dawson Lane said grimly, "You're not that good, Deacon. And the only question will be why I didn't wait an' let the rest of the town help with a rope."

Lane's bulldog jaw was showing ridges of muscle. His fingers around the gun's butt tightened.

Deacon Bottle, reading showdown in his eyes, set himself for the last move he might ever make.

THE tight circle of murderous intent was broken apart, suddenly, by the rush of boots outside. Someone bawled out an order. The front door slammed

open. As if the rain were a battering fist between his shoulder blades, a spider of a man sprawled inside, stopped and hung on short legs shaped like a wishbone.

Stubby and lean, he was hatless. Blood from a cut on his head streaked one side of his seamed, mustached face. There was a gun in his hand and a sheriff's badge on his muddy vest.

"Outside!" he yelled. "Every mother's son of you! Get down to the river!"

Dawson Lane's head swiveled. "Hold it, Dolman! There's a crook here to handle first!"

Sheriff Eli Dolman came stalking down the lobby, roaring. "I don't give a damn if he's seven times a murderer. He can handle a shovel the same as anybody else! Move, damn it! All three of you! I'll gun-whip the man that argues! That river's bustin' through. She'll smash this town like it was cardboard!"

LANE opened his mouth to speak. Dolman flung at him savagely, "By God, I mean it!" He was fifty pounds lighter than Dawson Lane, but the straightening of his arm sent Lane in a reeling dive for the door. He flipped around his gun muzzle to cover Cable. "Get, you gawking idiot! Or do you want a hot chunk of lead in your britches?"

Cable scuttled to the front. Dolman spun, jabbed the gun muzzle at Deacon Bottle. "You, too, mister! Right now!"

The Deacon jerked his head at Rip in the chair. "This boy's hurt. I'm waitin' till a doctor comes."

"Not here, you ain't! It'll take ever' pair of hands I can scrape up to block that water! You'll go or get a split skull out of it!"

Along with the rain blasting in the front door came trudging a short blocky individual with a black bag clutched in his right hand. "A youngster?" he queried. "Hurt?"

Deacon Bottle nodded at Dolman. "You win, Sheriff. He's over here, Doc. It's his leg."

Dolman began to swear in a frenzy. "Doc can handle that, you fool!"

At the door Deacon Bottle turned again. "If it begins to look bad, get him out of here! If he gets caught, if anything happens to him, I'll kill you when this is over with!"

"You'll hang for it if there's a tree left to hang you on!" Dolman snarled at him.

Then Deacon Bottle was out in the street with the slanting rain whipping him, slogging through the mud toward the river. Torches flickered feebly down there, lighting up weird figures who hurried and stamped and shuttled in the gloomy light like ants.

The danger point was the upper part of the neck of land, against which the river slugged with swollen power and fury. A low ridge had always turned that onslaught. Now, with the force of the river's drive doubled and redoubled, that ridge was crumbling. It was being stuffed bit by bit into the river's great maw. The river ripped at it with mighty claws, pounded it to chips, tore it away in chunks.

Rocks and bags of dirt were being poured in to patch the barrier. It seemed like a feeble and futile effort which could only delay, not avert, the roaring doom, but it was the only hope. Unhampered, the river would blast a way through the ridge, plow a new channel through the heart of the town.

Somewhere on the way Deacon Bottle lost Dolman. He stumbled on alone. Near the river bank was a broached keg of whiskey. The Deacon downed two cups of it, and a long breath sighed in his lungs. It cut away his staggering weariness, stiffened his bones. He was good for something yet.

The voice of the river was like a continuous, haphazard series of detonations. It grew to be a blurred wave of sound,

lessening in volume because it had stunned the eardrums.

The boiling confusion around the Deacon resolved itself into fairly ordered activity. From a pit in a hillside crews were filling sacks with earth, sewing up sausages of dirt in blankets. Deacon Bottle heaved a hundred and fifty pound sack up to his broad shoulder, joined the line crawling to the river bank and back again.

There the spray lashed up in sheets as the water churned and exploded against the rocky buttress. Torchlight flecked the broken surface with blood as it boomed in like a juggernaut, crashed like shivering glass and went sliding away along the ridge, still clawing and scraping.

DANGEROUS work there on the rim. Water, shooting up like a stream from a hose, could knock a man down, roll him away. The bank was caving. Men with pries, rolling up two-ton boulders, worked with ropes around their waists. The sacked dirt vanished, instantly swallowed by the ravenous torrent. It was a losing fight.

Something else was needed. Tree trunks, if they could be held in place, would do it. There were cottonwoods to spare along the foot of the ridge.

Up where the bank was crumbling most rapidly Deacon Bottle found the stubby, spider-like Sheriff Dolman. He pulled the lawman away, yelled hoarsely at him. Dolman's voice had worn down to a croak which couldn't be heard above the river's racket, but he nodded and went away running into the darkness.

Deacon Bottle, weariness nagging at him again, stopped by the whiskey keg. The dark, broken-jawed Cable was there. The hooded torch wedged between two rocks cast into his eyes a glitter that was wicked and burning. He melted back into the night.

With the liquor burning his throat, Deacon Bottle stared toward the dim lights of the town. There wasn't much chance, he saw now, of blocking the river. Maybe within another hour it would have smashed through and plunged, a wave of ripping destruction, through Blue Rock.

Rip was there. Stinging fear was crawling up into the Deacon's throat. Maybe that doctor could be trusted, but if other things came up—an emergency—

Then Sheriff Eli Dolman was back, croaking something unintelligible, with half a dozen double-bitted axes under his arm.

But that fear now was scraping the Deacon's mind, searing it. There was little enough chance, hardly any chance at all. The weakened ridge might buckle at any moment. It had probably been undercut. It would blow apart from the terrific pressure, and the murderous flood would burst through and go roaring to rip up and smash building after building.

And Rip would be in its path, helpless.

Deacon Bottle cried out hoarsely, "Not now! I've got a job to do first. I'll come back."

Sheriff Eli Dolman's voice lifted passionately out of its croak. "Nobody's leavin'! Nobody at all!"

"There's that boy back there! I tell you, he can't walk!"

Dolman shook his fist toward the river. "Block that an' he won't have to!"

"Too late!" Deacon Bottle shouted. "It can't be done!"

"It sure as hell can! I say so!" Sheriff Eli Dolman's gun was ramming, all at once, into the Deacon's belly. "If one man skins out, it'll start a stampede. I'll plug the gent that starts it. Stick it out, mister, an' we'll lick that dirty son of a river; start runnin', an' you'll get a slug in your brisket!"

Dolman meant it. The sheriff was a flame of energy, keyed up to a fight he wouldn't relinquish. He would shoot before he wasted another word. He reached

out and lifted the Deacon's two silver-mounted sixguns from their holsters. "You pack the axes. Get started!"

They picked up more men on the way. The Deacon had used an axe before, knew how to get work out of one.

At his back was the tortured bellowing of the stream rushing out of the higher hills. The night was thick and black, like a shroud drawn around a scene of blinding horror.

He could no longer see the lights of the town. The sounds of the wind and the water made a dull turmoil that throbbed steadily through his head.

Some of the cottonwoods were three feet through at the butt. A crew of axemen tore into them, and the Deacon was one of them. There was a kind of madness in Deacon Bottle now. Strength came to him from somewhere, and he got the swing of his thick shoulders behind the axe. The blade hissed in the rain, bit to the haft at each stroke.

He was driving, driving, driving, and in his mind was a glowing sequence of things —the bright axe blade, huge trunks to bolster a failing barrier, a river stopped and turned. He couldn't get to Rip, but he could keep the river from reaching him!

The Deacon's tree was the first to go. The thunder of its falling overwhelmed other sound, left silence. Horses were ready. They were roped to the cottonwood and the giant was dragged to the bank above the ridge.

No easy trick to get it out into the water. The butt was pried around and out. Out until the current caught it. Ropes intended to guide it were torn loose. The branches were flung out halfway down the trunk. The current twisted it, then slammed it against the ridge and pinned it there.

Boulders were rolled down for anchors. More trees came. Deacon Bottle stayed for the wicked work of placing them. Some were lost. But slowly a tangled wad of branches and rocks and sacks of dirt grew to plug the gap.

DEACON BOTTLE stalked the bank, worry gnawing at him and goading him on. Burned-down torches showed him there—a blocky figure in drenched and muddy rags, moving continually, weighing the chances of the barrier—and Rip's hopes for life.

The job was done, or nearly so. The berserk river had been thrown and saddled. A faint gray bar was probing through the blackness in the east. A bearded driller leaped to the whiskey keg. "Time," he bellowed, "to wash down our insides, too!"

Only the Deacon remained to prowl the bank for one last look. So it was that he alone heard the throttled, agonized cry: "Good God, she won't last two minutes more! Water's breakin' through! Right here!"

Consternation hit him like a fist. He whirled and jumped for the voice. He slipped and stumbled helplessly in the mud as he went past the plugged gap in the ridge. Spray leaped up to lace his bare face and arms. Over yonder the voice had come from. Where a tangle of jammed branches made a black mound in the dark.

And out of that black tangle, as he plunged for it, whipped an arrow of flame. The ear-deadening hammer of the river against the ridge drowned out the sound of the shot, but the bullet slashed the inside of Deacon Bottle's sleeveless left arm.

He got it then. What had been started in the hotel lobby was being finished here. And Sheriff Eli Dolman had his guns!

To retreat would have been suicide. The shot had driven the Deacon down. His outflung hands struck something solid in the mud. A limb, wrenched from one of the cottonwoods, and thrown up on the

bank. The bough was six feet long and as thick as his arm.

He came up with it, lunged ahead. Gunflame speared at him again. The explosion was in ludicrous miniature. Unhit, Deacon Bottle swung one end of the limb with both hands. It hurtled into the black trap of branches, a whistling thunderbolt of destruction. It was better than a bullet sent into that targetless black heap. It was a twenty pound weight, whirling in a six-foot circle, with all the Deacon's brawn behind it.

Charging up, Deacon Bottle heard the scream rasp in a man's throat. He saw the figure outlined dimly for an instant against the east's gray band, saw the wildly threshing arms. The splash of his falling was soundless. The river churned over the spot, boiling savagely.

One man was gone, but there might have been two. Deacon Bottle crouched at the edge of the branches, waiting. Through the sullen hammering of the river a voice reached him. Half strangled, weak, calling for help.

It was beginning to lighten now. Deacon Bottle saw two crossed trunks supporting the tangle, and went in under them, feeling his way cautiously. The voice stopped, began again. The Deacon pushed ahead, easing his weight with care. A misstep would plunge him into water from which there would be no return. The river was close, almost under him, angrily pounding and hissing.

Then he saw Dawson Lane. Lane was a good two yards out beyond him. He had fallen backwards apparently, had been caught by the shifting branches and was being dragged down. His head and one clutching hand were visible. A minute or two more and he would be gone.

He saw the Deacon, recognized him. Lane didn't cry out again. His eyes, staring and agonized, fastened themselves on the Deacon's. He didn't expect help from Deacon Bottle.

There was a moment in which that thought took cruel and relentless hold of the Deacon. He had only to wait a minute, maybe two, and Dawson Lane would be a dead man. There would be no one to claim Rip Carson. He didn't have to give Rip up, not unless—

There was straight danger in it if Deacon Bottle went out farther than he already was, but he inched his way out. Inched out until he could grip Dawson Lane's hand. He braced himself and pulled. Dawson Lane left his boot in the river, but he came out.

Deacon Bottle got him under the arms, pulled him clear of that treacherous tangle. For a time they both lay panting in the mud, spent and breathless. Then the Deacon, his face grim, began to stagger to his feet.

Dawson Lane stretched out a shaking hand, caught his arm with a grip like a trap's bite. "Deacon," he burst out hoarsely, " 'fore you go—I got a whole hell of a lot wrong."

"Yes, a hell of a lot," the Deacon answered harshly.

Lane's grip didn't relax. "Had to—play it that way!" he gasped. "Don't you see it, Deacon? I thought you were after the kid's money. I had to do it—"

For a long time the Deacon stood there, with the river booming at his back and the gray light of morning around him. A river shackled and a morning that had brought a change. Perhaps he, too, had been wrong. Perhaps now little Rip Carson was going to get the break he deserved.

Deacon Bottle put down a hand to Dawson Lane. His voice was gruff. "Come along, mister. That little rascal will be howlin' his head off if we both don't show up to tell him what happened."

Two of the raiders rode at him, their guns blasting.

A LAWMAN REMITS IN GUNSMOKE

By L. ERNENWEIN

Deputy Marshal Mike Isham risked bushwhack bullets to pay a cow-town medico a couple of dollars for patching his lead-scarred hide. . . . But all the pay Doc Tucker asked was for Mike to throw in his guns against a ruthless range-hog—and fight shoulder to shoulder with the bushwhack renegade who had sworn Mike must die!

Great manhunter novelette

CHAPTER ONE

Drygulch Trail to Hell

ONCE, twice, then a third time the distant bark of a gun disturbed the siesta silence of Bootjack Basin. That sound stirred up a quick caution in Mike Isham. It brought a sober line to this tall rider's lips and put a wariness on his lean, high-boned face. He held his fiddle-footed roan at the rim of the ridge and waited. But there were no more shots.

For a long moment Isham's sun-squinted eyes searched the sweep of brush-dotted land below. He studied the sprawling pattern of San Sabino town, a black scar against the glittering alkali, and let his gaze roam over the tumbled hills beyond.

Isham remembered the last time he had seen this far-flung range and it came to him that the blast of a gun had also heralded that other visit. He had chased Kid Smith, the Texas killer, half way across Arizona and had lost him in these rock-crested hills. The Kid had ambushed him, and Isham had ridden into San Sabino with three slug holes in his hide. Those wounds were healed now, but they had brought him back to Bootjack Basin.

As his horse settled into a shuffling

trot, Isham watched the trail ahead. The shots had come from this direction, the first two in rapid succession; the last one delayed—like a drygulch coupe de grace. From long force of habit he nudged his guns loose in their leathers, and wondered what had become of Kid Smith. . . .

Two hours of steady riding put Isham out of the hills and into the cactus-studded flats east of San Sabino. He rode with hat tilted low against the sun's brassy glare, but his questing, hawk-like eyes were constantly searching, and his guns swayed smoothly to the roan's plodding stride. On that other sun-drenched day he had briefly ignored the subtle six sense warning that is every gun-rider's guardian angel; now that same nagging expectancy had him entirely alert.

MID-AFTERNOON heat hung over San Sabino with scorching intensity when Isham jogged his jaded roan down the town's dusty main thoroughfare. A dog, dozing in the narrow shade of the Palace Saloon doorway, came suddenly to life. Its hackles rose in bristling defiance and it barked once, then yelped as a heavy boot caught its flank with a well-aimed kick.

Isham glanced at the owner of the boot, and found him staring arrogantly. He was a big man, thick of neck and barrel-chested, garbed in the gear of a range rider. A red bristle of whiskers put a shaggy bulge on his beefy, coarse-lipped face and it matched the thick brows that bushed his muddy, close-set eyes. Two heavy guns, their black butts flaring at either thigh, sagged his brass-lined belts. He sluiced a stream of tobacco juice into the dust and wiped his soiled mouth with the back of a hairy, ham-like hand.

Meeting this man's brazen scrutiny and instantly resenting it, Isham pulled up in front of him. "See something you want?" he asked flatly.

The redhead's gimlet gaze swerved to the roan's sweaty flank, studying the animal's brand. "Yuh just ridin' through?" he demanded, a gutteral brashness in his bull-like voice.

"Mebbe," Isham admitted. "Why?"

"If yuh'r lookin' for a job, they's only one outfit to ride for here. I'm Red Maxon—boss of the Bootjack Pool."

Isham asked casually: "Range trouble, hereabouts?"

"Yeah," Maxon grunted. "Some."

A thin smile flecked Isham's lips. "Don't guess I want any," he murmured. "Thanks just the same."

Maxon's muddy eyes glinted narrowly. "If yuh don't ride for the Pool, yuh better keep goin'," he declared, then turned abruptly away.

Isham glanced at the dog cringing at the corner of the saloon, then looked at Maxon's broad back as the redhead slammed through the Palace batwings.

"So?" he mused wonderingly, and rode on along the street.

Dismounting in front of the Dixie Hotel, Isham tied the roan to the hitch-rack and sauntered across the board sidewalk. As he went up the steps he glanced briefly at the three men who sat on the hotel veranda. One of them, a tall rider with yellow hair, was absorbed in some heated discussion. His face was turned away, but his drawling voice seemed strangely familiar. . . .

Isham was considering this fact as he went through the doorway—and narrowly avoided colliding with a tall and dusky-haired girl. He side-stepped awkwardly and saw a quick flush of color deepen the tinted ivory of this girl's cheeks as his arm lightly brushed the front of her dress.

He said: "Beg pardon, ma'am. I didn't see you."

Her sultry eyes swept his double-rigged gungear in a swift and appraising glance. A scornful frown pouted her mouth and she said coldly, "I heard the Pool was importing gunslingers, but I didn't expect

they'd bring in blind ones—or drunks!"

Isham stood for a moment, strongly aware of this girl's striking beauty as she walked haughtily across the veranda. He watched her go down the steps and heard her speak to one of the men outside. Then he went across the lobby and looked at the pot-bellied little man who sat reading a newspaper.

"This," Isham observed dryly, "is a right unfriendly town. I been barked at by a dog, warned by a red-headed galoot, and dressed down slick by a good looking girl."

Doc Tucker's pudgy face appeared above the newspaper. He pushed up his spectacles and eyed Isham with grave concern. "You look fit," he said regretfully, "which proves that only the good die young. Those three bullets would've killed an honest man."

Isham knew that Tucker was remembering the early morning when a blood-spattered stranger had knocked on his door. "It's been nearly a year," he said, "but I didn't forget you saved my life. I came back to pay off, Doc. What's the fee?"

The old medico's faded eyes dropped a lingering glance to Isham's guns. He gazed at them reflectively for a moment, then met the young rider's questioning eyes. "How many men you killed, since I saved you from a hole in Boot Hill?"

A self-mocking smile twisted Isham's lips. "Sorry you didn't let me cash in, Doc?" he asked.

"I should've," Tucker said flatly. His apple-cheeked face held a stern gravity. "There's too many gunslick galoots running loose—be a good thing if they all died off, right now."

ISHAM shaped up a smoke and, lighting it, dragged deeply. "You never knew much about me, Doc. Seems like you jumped to some quick conclusions."

Doc Tucker grunted. "I've seen a lot of noose-dodging saddle tramps in my time," he declared, "and I never called one wrong yet!"

A flicker of amusement warmed Isham's gray eyes. "Have it your own way," he murmured. "I didn't ride a hundred miles to argue, Doc. How much do I owe you—besides gratitude?"

Again the medico's glance shifted to Isham's guns. He said soberly, "All you owe me is for my professional skill. I'll take my pay in trade—for your skill with a gun."

Isham's eyes tightened perceptibly. But there was no hint of anger in his voice when he spoke. "Mebbe it isn't for hire," he said softly. "Mebbe I don't hire out my skill."

"All right then," Tucker said impatiently, "we'll call it even. But if you want to pay off, I'll tell you my proposition."

Isham eased his tall frame into a chair. "I'm listening," he muttered.

"You say you were threatened by a redhead," Tucker began, "which means you've already met Red Maxon—self-elected boss of Bootjack Basin. He got his start long-looping other men's cows. Working in cahoots with our skin-flint banker, Tate Fay, Maxon thieved three outfits into bankruptcy. Now he runs 'em under the Bootjack Pool. Fay is backing his land-grabbing game and Sheriff Fat Dollard is on the Pool payroll."

"It sounds," Isham observed, "like Red won his own election."

"He's got this country scared skinney," Tucker declared. "All but old Jim Kenyon. Jim owns the KX spread. That was his daughter Eve you bumped into."

Remembering Eve Kenyon's scornful voice and the flash of her amber eyes, Isham smiled whimsically. Doc Tucker wasn't the only one here who believed he was a gunslick renegade. Eve Kenyon also had him tallied for a paid killer. The gun brand, he thought grimly, must mark him plainly.

"Kenyon giving the Pool a fight?" he asked.

"Yes—a fight he can't win," Tucker muttered. "Not unless he gets some gun backing. When he refused to sell out to the Pool Maxon built a ten-mile drift fence on open range and shut Kenyon off from the Rio Pago. Maxon had no right to build that fence. He knows it, so does Tate Fay and Sheriff Dollard. But they also know that by the time Kenyon gets a court verdict he'll be bankrupt. The only way he can win is to yank out that fence now—and he'll have to back that play with guns."

"So?" Isham asked.

"Jim Kenyon is the best friend I've got," Tucker declared. "I'd like to help him, but my tools aren't built for killing. That's why I'm offering to swap my skill for yours. How about it?"

Isham's right hand toyed absently with the deputy marshal's badge in his pants pocket. His guns were already hired out to the law. This cranky old medico would feel differently if he knew who had hired the gun skill he wanted in trade. But the difference, somehow, didn't seem important to Isham. He was a professional gun-tosser, with or without a badge. There was a debt to pay here—and it was long over due.

"I'll sign on with Kenyon," he murmured, "if that's the way you want it."

A quick smile eased the medico's pudgy features. "Jim's over at the Mercantile Store," he declared. "Let's go have a pow-wow." As they started across the street he asked suddenly, "say what's your name? You never told it."

"You never asked it," Isham said dryly. "It's Isham—Mike Isham."

THEY went on into the store and found Kenyon buying saddle gun shells. His weather-beaten face held a rock-hewn gravity and his flinty eyes were sharply appraising as Doc Tucker introduced Isham. "I'm payin' gun wages," Kenyon said slowly, "but they won't be no pay-day till after beef round-up."

Here, Isham knew instinctively, was a man who would never quit—a stubborn old warrior who would die fighting for his spread. Isham had known other men like Kenyon; not many, but a few. He had met them on the back trails, in hell towns and mining camps. They were a breed apart, born with a high-burning courage that drove them relentlessly.

"That'll be time enough," he said.

At that moment, as they were shaking hands, Eve Kenyon came into the store with the yellow-haired rider. Isham saw the girl's startled expression. Then he stared tight-eyed at the man behind her and knew quickly why this man's drawling voice had sounded familiar.

Kenyon said, "Isham—this is my daughter Eve, and my son Whitey."

The girl glanced from her father to Doc Tucker, as if seeking some explanation of Isham's presence here.

"He's hired on to help your dad lick Red Maxon," Tucker said.

Isham saw some of the surprise leave her eyes. But no warming smile replaced it. He watched Whitey Kenyon narrowly, wondering what this young rider would say—or do.

For a long moment Whitey stood rigidly poised, as if held in the grip of utter amazement. Then his features relaxed and he stuck out his hand. Isham felt the tight pressure of his fingers and knew why this smooth-faced rider was glad to be grasping his hand. Isham had known Whitey Kenyon by a different name—as Kid Smith, gunslick member of the Wild Bunch. The Kid was wanted for murder in Texas and for a stage holdup in New Mexico. But now his smoky-blue eyes were brazenly cheerful.

"Glad yuh signed on," he drawled pleasantly. "We can sho' use some high-class help."

The realization that he was shaking hands with the killer who had ambushed him put a thin smile on Isham's lips. Here, he thought amusedly, was a curious twist to Fate's long list of vagaries. He had lost Kid Smith because of three bullets in his hide; now, paying for the removal of those same bullets, he had found the Kid.

CHAPTER TWO

A Bargain in Death

TWO men, standing at a window on the second floor of the San Sabino Bank building, watched Mike Isham ride out of town behind the KX rig. They were an oddly-paired team, these two, entirely dissimilar in appearance and in their reaction to the street scene below. But beneath the physical and mental characteristics that separated them was a close and powerful kinship, a ruthless cruelty, fed by the same flame of rapacious, grasping greed.

Red Maxon angrily spat tobacco juice into a cuspidor. "I warned that pilgrim!" he bellowed. "He's bullet bait from now on!"

Banker Tate Fay slowly settled his gaunt, black-garbed frame into a chair at his desk. Thin to the point of emaciation, there was a ghastly sharpness to his hawk-like, bony face—a face that seemed too big for its tight-drawn, parchment skin and for the scrawny gray neck that supported it. His bloodless lips parted in a sneering grin, exposing yellowed, fang-like teeth.

"You don't seem to influence some people much," he observed caustically. "We're still waiting to take over Kenyon's spread—and old Jeff Brent didn't scare much either."

Maxon jerked a cigar from his vest and severed its end with a crunching, savage snap of his underslung jaws. "I'll crowd Kenyon out," he growled harshly. "Dollard's takin' care of Brent this afternoon."

A crafty gleam glinted in Fay's cavernous, predatory eyes. He toyed with a pencil, forming tight fitting circles on a piece of paper. "Maybe we can use the stranger," he mused, a falsetto twang in his rasping voice. "A pilgrim might come in handy right now if Dollard stopped Brent like we planned."

Maxon slouched on a corner of the desk. "Meanin' what?" he demanded. "Don't talk riddles."

"Brent," Fay reflected, "was going to come in to liquidate his mortgage today. He was carrying a fair-sized roll of money. Dollard rode out to meet him—beyond Apache Ridge."

"What's that got to do with the pilgrim?" Maxon demanded.

A sneering contempt edged Fay's nasal voice. "You're a fast man with a gun, or a rope, Red. But your brain work is slow, awful slow. Sometimes I wonder if that bulge between your ears is really a brain or just a knot to keep your spine from unraveling."

Red banners of anger flamed hot in Maxon's face. His hands darted instinctively to his guns and he snarled savagely, "I've took all the hooraw talk I'm takin' from yuh, Fay!"

"That's another thing," the banker said quietly, holding Maxon's glinting eyes in the grip of his gaze. "You boil over too fast. I'm trying to explain that if Brent is found dead it's reasonable to believe somebody drygulched him for his money. You say the stranger rode in from the east, an hour ago?"

"Yeah," Maxon grunted. A quick grin creased his beefy cheeks. "Yeah—that's right. Dollard can arrest the pilgrim—for killin' Brent!"

* * *

The road to KX angled across a ten-mile stretch of sand and greasewood. Few cattle ranged here, and no sign of water hole or creek relieved the parched, flat floor of the desert. Later, when the road

climbed abruptly into the Ramapo Hills, Isham saw cattle aplenty and observed that they carried the KX brand.

Riding beside the dust-churning wagon, Isham covertly watched Whitey Kenyon and wondered what sort of play this young renegade would make. That he would try to shoot his way out was certain. But just how he would go about it had Isham puzzled. Perhaps the Kid would try another sneak-shooting.

Both Whitey and his father had talked occasionally on the long trip from town. But Eve, sitting on the high seat between them, remained silently aloof.

Studying her profile at intervals—the pert, tip-tilted nose, the gently curving, red-lipped mouth and rounded, swan-like throat, Isham became firmly convinced that she was the most beautiful girl he had ever known, and the proudest. There was a regal, almost haughty poise to her rounded, womanly body and it enhanced the girlish, breeze-blown curls that clustered beneath the broad brim of her faun-colored Stetson.

Twice, when their eyes met briefly, she glanced disdainfully away, and when the rig rolled to a stop in the KX yard she went to the house without speaking.

"Eve don't cotton to strangers much," Jim Kenyon said. "And she's got fancy ideas about guns and the galoots that use 'em."

ISHAM glanced at Whitey and caught the questioning expression in this young rider's eyes as he unhitched the horses. Whitey, Isham guessed, had kept his owlhoot riding a deep secret since returning home.

"Mebbe," Isham muttered, "she's got me tallied wrong."

Kenyon cradled a half dozen boxes of rifle shells in his arms. "No, I don't reckon she's misread yuh'r brand any," he declared, turning toward the house. "Whitey'll fix yuh up with a bed in the bunkhouse," he added.

The KX, Isham saw, was strictly a desert spread. The ranch house, a rambling one-story structure with a thatch-roofed veranda, was built of 'dobe bricks, as was the bunkhouse. The circular horse corral was fenced with a solid row of juniper posts and the wagonshed had been built with a minimum of boards. But if there were signs of frugality here, there was no evidence of neglect. Branding irons and dutch ovens hung on the wagonshed wall and the other gear looked well cared for.

A giant cottonwood cast a welcome shade in front of the house. Gnarled pepper trees sent long shadows across the yard and water dripped steadily from a windmill pump. The nearby hills were fringed with green-leaved manzanita, and grama grass grew thick in the bottoms. Seeing these things, and knowing their value, Isham realized why old Jim Kenyon was willing to defend this spread with his life.

When the horses had been turned into the corral, Isham followed Whitey Kenyon into the deserted bunkhouse. They stood in silence for a moment, each strongly aware of the other's tense waiting.

Then Isham said fiercely, "I ought to cut you down and bring you into Tucson tied across a saddle. But on account of your sister I'll let you leave right side up, riding in front of me."

The young renegade lit a cigarette with nervous fingers. His eyes searched Isham's face, as if seeking some sign of mercy. Then his thick-lipped mouth eased into a crooked grin. "Knew yuh was a tough lawdog to lose," he muttered. "But I never figgered yuh'd come lookin' for me here."

"I came to pay off Doc Tucker for digging your slugs out of my back," Isham said coldly. "Meeting you was an accident."

"Why'd yuh sign on to ride for KX?" Whitey asked curiously.

"Because Doc Tucker wouldn't take any other pay," Isham muttered. "Doc tagged me for a noose dodger; said your father needed gun help."

For a time, while his cigarette burned down in his fingers, Whitey Kenyon absorbed this information in silence. Then he faced Isham with grim determination.

"When yuh take me back," he said soberly, "I'll be a long time gone. I'd sho' like to help win this rumpus with Red Maxon before I go. I'm givin' my word I won't run off on yuh."

"When," Isham asked dryly, "did your word come to be worth anything?"

A quick surge of color tinted Kenyon's bland face. Killer courage flamed bright in his slitted eyes and hatred twisted his tight-lipped mouth. "I oughta knowed a lawdog ain't got no heart," he blurted, backing a step toward the door.

Watching this anger-spurred move and welcoming it, Isham stood poised. He saw Whitey's hand hover above his single gun and heard him say hoarsely, "I'll shoot it out now—Isham!"

Frozen, not by fear but by indecision, Isham stood motionless. He knew that he could outdraw this white-faced renegade —could kill him easily. This wasn't Eve Kenyon's yellow-haired brother he was facing now; it was Kid Smith, the crafty young owlhooter who had drygulched him. Kid Smith needed killing—but not here, in front of his family. And there was a doctor bill that had to be paid.

In that fleeting instant, while these thoughts flashed through Isham's mind, Whitey Kenyon won a close decision with death. Isham said soberly, "All right—I'll wait until the job here is finished."

A gusty sigh slipped from Kenyon's lips. His hand came away from his gun, started out in a handshake gesture, then went on to dig makings from his shirt pocket.

"Don't reckon I could've beat yuh on the draw," he said finally. Then added, *"Muchas gracias, amigo."*

Isham's face held its frozen gravity. But behind that emotionless mask surged a tumultuous amazement. The idea that Kid Smith could appreciate anything—even a reprieve from certain death, seemed inconceivable. And the young owlhooter had actually voiced that appreciation!

Later, during the long days and nights of bitter range war, Isham would come to understand something of Whitey Kenyon's rash wildness. But now, on the heels of his utter amazement, Isham could not fit Kid Smith into this new, and strangely different frame.

"They's only two other riders sleepin' in here," Whitey said. "Yuh got four bunks to choose from."

Isham glanced at the bunks. "Always did like a choice," he grinned. "Mebbe I'll give 'em all a try out."

CHAPTER THREE

Murder Warrant

AFTER supper, while Eve washed the dishes, Jim Kenyon held a council of war at the kitchen table.

"Maxon's fence," he declared hotly, "has got to come out—now. Apache Creek'll be bone dry in another two weeks. If we don't get through to the Rio Pago we're done for."

Isham watched Pop Biddle tamp tobacco into his pipe, and saw a scowl deepen the ruts on the oldster's leathery face. "Yuh cain't match guns with Maxon," Pop drawled gruffly. His gaze briefly shifted to Isham and he added meaningly, "One gun rider don't make a war crew."

Tod Hook, bald-headed little rider with a gimpy leg, asked, "What yuh aimin' to do, Jim?"

"We'll yank the fence and stand guard to keep 'em from buildin' another," Kenyon declared. "We'll push our beef down

into the bottoms where they can take on some tallow."

A gleaming enthusiasm came into Whitey's blue eyes. The Kid, Isham guessed, had a deep-rooted urge for action —the same urge that had sent him into Texas to ride with the Wild Bunch. It occurred to him that some part of Whitey's rash wildness was courage; that it was closely related to the grim stubbornness which had driven Jim Kenyon to build a cow spread here, and to hold it against the grasping greed of Red Maxon.

"The Pool ain't got so many gunslicks," Whitey said. "We can give 'em a whirl any time it's needed."

Isham saw deep concern turn Eve's face entirely sober. She stopped wiping a plate and said urgently, "Pop Biddle is right, Dad. There's no use forcing a range war. The court will order the fence taken out."

Jim Kenyon glanced impatiently at his daughter. "Yeah—when it's too late," he muttered gruffly, and turned to Isham. "What yuh think of my plan?"

Isham sensed Pop Biddle's thinly-veiled resentment at his intrusion here. The old cowpuncher didn't want a professional gunslinger on the payroll, and he was already showing it. "You can't play polite with a range hog," Isham said slowly. "If you're ready to fight, now's as good a time as any."

* * *

The next day, while the KX crew toiled at the tedious task of demolishing the fence along the base of the Ramapo Hills, Mike Isham sat slouched in saddle on the high crest of a boulder-strewn ridge. His eyes kept constant vigil, scanning the brush-tangled southern slopes and the far-flung flats beyond them. If trouble came it would probably come from this direction, for the Pool's headquarters lay twenty miles south of these huddled hills. But no sign of dust-head nor movement disturbed the shimmering heat haze that danced above the brush.

Isham glanced down the slants to where Whitey Kenyon snaked out a section of fence. The Kid worked like a man toiling against time, seemingly unmindful of the hangnoose verdict that awaited him in Texas. Watching him now, Isham tried to unsnarl his conflicting impressions of this yellow-haired rider—to understand the code of a cold-eyed killer who could be a loyal, considerate son and brother.

A sudden crunch of nearby gravel sent Isham whirling around, guns half drawn. Then, as his eyes met Eve Kenyon's level gaze, he saw a half smile turn her lips entirely soft. He nudged back his hat and drawled, "Howdy, ma'am."

She pulled up beside him and sent a quick glance down the ridge. "No trouble —yet?" she inquired.

"Not a sign," he assured her, and wondered why she had come.

"I still think this move is a big mistake," she said softly. "It will give Red Maxon the excuse he's been waiting for."

ISHAM felt the full sincerity of her mood and the brooding dread behind it.

"I don't know why you came here, Mike Isham," she said. "I may have misjudged you. I hope that I have and that you'll understand why I'm asking you to leave."

"What difference," Isham asked wonderingly, "does my being here make?"

"The difference means fighting and bloodshed—a war we can't win. Dad wouldn't have faced it without you. He had no gun rider until you came. Pop Biddle isn't a gun hand, neither is Tod—nor Whitey."

She was probably right about the rest of them, Isham reflected, but she was dead wrong about Whitey. That wild youngster could match guns with any of Maxon's crew, and he was itching for the opportunity.

For a time, while he gave his attention to shaping a cigarette, Isham remained silent. He knew now why she

had so plainly resented him, even after she had learned he was not a Pool gunman.

"I've got my reasons for being here, ma'am," he said slowly. "I'd like to do what you ask—but I've got to stay. For the present, anyhow."

A faint frown tightened the contours of her face. "Isn't there anything I can say that will change your mind?" she asked wistfully.

There was a pleading note in her voice, a throbbing huskiness that touched strongly some vibrant cord of his emotion; and her dark-lashed eyes held more warmth than he had ever seen there.

"Would you leave—if I went with you?" she asked softly.

It came to him then that she too had courage—different than the courage of Jim Kenyon or Kid Smith, but fed by the same rash willfulness. She was fighting now to save her father and brother from impending disaster—to ward off the bloody destruction and ravage of range war.

A high-riding admiration surged through him. He reached for her hand and feeling the firm pressure of her slim fingers, drew her abruptly into his arms. A startled expression widened her eyes and he saw that her ripe lips were firmly set, as with some strong and desperate resolution.

For a long moment, while the perfume of her tumbled curls was a delicate ambrosia to his nostrils, Isham held her close—unyielding but unresisting. He knew suddenly that she shared some part of the strong attraction between them, that she would go with him willingly. But the thought of his debt to Doc Tucker and the reason he owed that debt, halted the rush of his racing emotion.

His arms released her grudgingly and he said soberly, "I'm staying, Eve—regardless."

Color drained from her face, leaving her eyes strangely dark—desolate. She considered him with a steady, appraising gaze, then turned her pony and rode slowly back across the rocky summit.

Watching her, Isham knew that this brown-eyed girl had stirred something deep within him. It was as if some smouldering ember of his being had kindled suddenly into flame, quickening his pulse and disturbing the orderly run of his thoughts.

It was ironical, he mused soberly, that the only girl who had ever done this to him should be the sister of a hangnoose renegade—the man who had tried to kill him.

When she disappeared over the brow of the hill, Isham turned his gaze down the slants to Whitey Kenyon. "You've sure messed me up, Kid Smith," he muttered, "in more ways than one."

* * *

Calamity came close to KX the next morning as Kenyon and his crew saddled up for the day's work. Whitey had gone to the bunkhouse for a new latigo strap and he was still in there when Sheriff Dollard rode into the yard with a hard-faced deputy.

The lawman pulled up in front of Kenyon and eased his corpulent bulk back in the saddle. "I'm looking for a stranger," he declared, then nodded toward Isham. "Reckon that's him."

A quick interest brightened Pop Biddle's rheumy eyes. The oldster sent a gloating glance toward Kenyon. "It looks," he drawled, "like yore losin' yore gunhawk, Jim."

Kenyon scowled. "What you want him for, Dollard?" he demanded.

The bulging-eyed lawman glanced at his deputy. Seemingly assured by the saddle gun this slouching hombre held in the crook of his arm, Dollard said deliberately, "For the murder of old Jeff Brent!"

CHAPTER FOUR

The Baited Trap

ISHAM came quickly alert. He heard Jim Kenyon's gasp of amazement and felt the impact of eyes turned suddenly on him. The thought came to him that he could flash his marshal's badge and quickly end this mixup. But that would bring a showdown, and he wasn't ready for it. Letting these men know he was a marshal would mean arresting Whitey Kenyon now, leaving the KX to the mercy of Red Maxon—dodging his debt to Doc Tucker.

"When did it happen?" Kenyon asked.

"Yesterday," Dollard declared, "just before this pilgrim rode into town. Brent was bushwhacked and robbed."

The memory of the three shots he had heard from the ridge flashed into Isham's mind. So his hunch had been right.

Then abruptly Kenyon was facing him, eyes tightly questioning. "How about it, Isham?" he rasped.

"I heard the shots," Isham said. "But I didn't do the shooting. If I had I wouldn't be here now, waiting for arrest."

Dollard's fat face turned to Isham, giving him a careful consideration, as if estimating the danger of his guns.

"Mebbe yuh didn't," But I'm takin' yuh in, Isham. Unbuckle yuh'r irons."

"Not so fast, Dollard," Jim Kenyon growled doggedly. "Yuh ain't got evidence enough to arrest him. And yuh ain't goin' to frame him."

Dollard sent a sly wink at his deputy. The man's gun came up and he cackled sneeringly, "Here's the evidence, Kenyon—and it's ready to talk!"

Isham sensed the hair-trigger enmity that prodded these men and knew that a mere spark of additional anger would set off the explosion. He stepped forward quickly, hands high. "All right," he called.

At that moment, as Dollard relaxed, Isham saw Whitey Kenyon step from the bunkhouse, gun in hand. The young renegade was ten feet from the lawmen, and directly behind them.

"Drop it, lawdog!" Whitey called tersely, "Right now!"

Dollard's head jerked around and Whitey snarled, "Yuh'r a nice target, fat guy."

The deputy's glance darted to Dollard, and seeing the sheriff's pop-eyed indecision, slid his gun slowly into scabbard.

Jim Kenyon said sharply, "Git going Dollard, and don't come back!"

Hot fury flamed red in Dollard's fleshy face. "Yuh'll pay for this high-handed play," he blurted, and sent a quick glance at Isham. "If yuh come now yuh'll git a fair trial, mister. Otherwise yuh'r liable to git lynched."

"I'll take that chance," Isham drawled.

Dollard pivoted his mount and the deputy followed him out of the yard.

Pop Biddle strode over to Kenyon. "Yuh've done made a mistake, Jim," he declared. "Jeff Brent was yore friend, and mine too."

"If I thought Isham did it I'd shoot him myself," Kenyon said. "But I ain't seein' him railroaded."

"Yuh've gone loco," Biddle rasped, "and yuh cain't be told. But I'm tellin' yuh one thing now. Either Isham goes —or I go!"

Isham started to speak, to tell Kenyon he would leave. But Whitey snapped, "Let him go, Dad. We need Isham's guns."

A stubborn pride glinted in Kenyon's squinted eyes as he met Biddle's demanding gaze. "If yuh feel that way," he said deliberately, "yuh better leave."

Biddle turned and went stiffly to the bunkhouse. Tod Hook stared blankly for a moment, indecision plainly marking his sober face. Then cursing softly, he turned to his horse.

Isham became aware of Eve Kenyon, standing just behind her father. Meeting her gaze he saw the same scorn that had flamed in her eyes in the Dixie doorway, and knew well what she was thinking. She had asked him to leave, had even offered to go with him. Now his presence here held a double threat. It would bring open conflict, not only with Red Maxon but with the law as well.

Kenyon muttered wearily, "Come on—it's gettin' late," and hoisted himself into saddle.

When they rode out of the yard Isham pulled alongside of Whitey. "Thanks for the standoff," he said dryly.

Whitey grinned. "I didn't want yuh flashin' yuh'r marshal tin. Not yet."

No, Isham thought morosely—not yet. The recollection of Eve's scorn put a rankling impatience in him, an eagerness to finish what had to be done. There was nothing he could win here—no way he could possibly square himself with Eve. The scorn she felt for him now would turn to hatred when he took Kid Smith to keep a gallows date with death.

DOC TUCKER sat on the Dixie veranda, idly watching the ebb and flow of men and wagons along Main Street. He had observed Sheriff Dollard's return from KX, without knowing where the lawman had been, and had seen him stop and talk to Red Maxon across the street. They were too far away for Doc to hear what was said but Red Maxon's mirthless laughter caused him to glance that way now and Dollard's angry gestures strongly stirred his curiosity.

Dollard and Maxon separated. The lawman strode pompously toward the jail while Maxon turned into the bank. A moment later Doc saw Pop Biddle step from the Palace Saloon doorway and noted that the old man's saddle-warped legs moved unsteadily as the frosty-haired puncher came slowly toward him.

When Biddle came up the steps, Doc inquired humorously, "What you celebrating, Pop?"

A stern frown made Biddle's gaunt face bleakly solemn. He hunkered down beside the medico and drawled gruntingly, "I ain't workin' with no bushwhack gunhawks—not even for Jim Kenyon!"

"You referring to Mike Isham?" Doc asked.

"That's the galoot. He cut down Jeff Brent and robbed him!"

"How," Doc inquired, "do you know that?"

Pop Biddle's toothless mouth twisted sarcastically. "Sheriff Dollard came out to git Isham this mornin', but young Whitey draws his iron and Jim Kenyon backs the kid's fool play. I tried to argue Jim out of protectin' Isham, same as I tried to keep him from bustin' Maxon's fence. But yuh cain't tell Jim nothin'. He's on the prod. Me, I don't cotton to killers, nohow."

"Maybe you've tallied the wrong man," Tucker suggested. "Isham's a renegade, but he's no damn fool. If he'd drygulched Brent like you say he wouldn't stay here to help Kenyon just because I asked him to."

Pop snarled a curse. "Isham's a gunhawk, ain't he? His guns can be hired. He's out for the dinero any way he can get it! Jeff Brent was a galoot yuh could ride the river with. I'm aimin' to help Dollard bring in his killer!"

Biddle, Doc realized, was plenty drunk. He had to be, otherwise the peaceable old puncher would not think of aiding Sheriff Dollard, tool of the Bootjack Pool. But booze, and a desire for revenge, could cause strange alliances.

Tucker saw Sheriff Dollard come out of the jail and walk hurriedly toward the bank. The lawman was entering the side door that led up to Fay's living quarters when Biddle got quickly up. He teetered unsteadily on his run-over heels for a

moment, then started down the steps.

"There's the law," he declared. "I'm goin' to see that it operates, *muy pronto.*"

Doc called quickly, "Wait, Pop. Let's talk this thing over."

But Pop Biddle ignored the medico's urgent request. He angled across the dusty street in a staggering, bow-legged shamble and lurched into the stairway entrance. . . .

Dollard's voice sounded loud in Fay's small office when Biddle came in the door. "Kenyon's gone too far this time," the lawman declared. "I'm bringing him in with Isham and—"

Tate Fay's bony hand came up warningly as Biddle came across the threshold.

"What you want?" The banker asked harshly.

Biddle glanced at Red Maxon's slouching form, then his drink-flushed face turned to Dollard. "Yuh want Isham, don't yuh?" he asked.

Dollard's lumpy eyes turned to Fay, as if in habitual deference to the banker's command. But Red Maxon blurted, "Sure we want Isham. What about it?"

Biddle glanced contemptuously at the boss of the Bootjack Pool. "I'm talkin' to the law," he declared thickly, and turned to Dollard. "Yuh goin' to let Isham git away with Brent's murder?"

"No—certainly not," Dollard muttered. "I got stood off this mornin' because the KX had me outnumbered. But I'll bring that gunslick in—and I'll bring Kenyon with him!"

Biddle's face took on a contemplative thoughtfulness. "Mebbe I can make it easy to git Isham," he drawled slowly, "providin' yuh leave Jim Kenyon out of it."

Tate Fay snapped abruptly, "Say what you've got to say, Biddle. We're busy."

BIDDLE held his gaunt form stiffly erect. A note of stubborn defiance came into his whiskey-blurred voice and his faded eyes glinted unwaveringly. "I'm sayin' nothin'," he declared, "unless Kenyon goes clear!"

"All right—all right," Fay rasped crisply. "Dollard will leave Kenyon out of it. Go ahead and tell us how Isham can be taken—easily."

"They're rippin' out the Rio Pago line fence," Biddle muttered, "and Isham's standin' lookout, on Ramapo Ridge. If yuh come at him from the north yuh can git him cold."

Red Maxon cursed. "So that's why Kenyon hired a gun rider!" he snarled. "I'll show that old coot who's runnin' this Basin. He'll wish he'd hired a whole gun crew when I git through with him!"

"Kenyon," Fay reflected, "don't seem to scare worth a damn, Red."

The menace of these men's voices cut through the haze that fogged Biddle's brain. "Yuh said Kenyon was out," he remonstrated, "you ain't—"

Fay's cold voice broke in harshly. "He's tired, Red. Rock him to sleep."

A leering grin loosened Maxon's thick lips as he stepped toward Biddle. The old man staggered back and half turned, as if to run to the door. Then he stood frozen as Maxon's gun flashed out and up. The barrel sliced down, denting Biddle's battered hat and hitting his skull with a dull, solid thud.

For a full moment the blank-faced cowpuncher stood swaying uncertainly. He started again for the door but his legs buckled under him and he collapsed in a grotesque heap to the floor.

Maxon glanced at Fay. "What's next?" he asked impatiently. "How about takin' the KX right now—today?"

"I'll round up some deputies to ride with Red's crew," Dollard put in. "We'll smash Kenyon's outfit wide open!"

Fay lighted a long, thin cigar and puffed absently for a moment. "No," he said finally, "not today—nor tonight. First we lock up Biddle, for bein' too

drunk to walk. Then we wait for Kenyon to finish his fence work."

"Why wait?" Maxon demanded. "That's a thousand dollar fence."

"We built it," Fay muttered patiently, "so Kenyon wouldn't have a beef herd to sell this Fall. Once the fence is gone he'll drive every steer he's got down into the Rio Pago bottoms. When that's done you and Dollard will ride to the KX for Isham—at night. You won't get Isham, but you'll kill off Kenyon's saddle band. With KX afoot you'll have plenty of time to run Kenyon's beef herd across the Border. Those Mex vaqueros won't let the beef go to waste—and the KX will be bankrupt."

* * *

During the three days following Sheriff Dollard's visit, Jim Kenyon and his three man crew toiled from sun-up until dark, shoving KX beef through the two mile gap made in Maxon's line fence.

On the third night, while they rode home in the dusk, Jim Kenyon voiced the thought that had been nagging at them all. "It don't shape up right," the old cowman declared. "Dollard ain't been back to git Isham, and Red Maxon's crew ain't showed nowhere near us. They's somethin' in the wind!"

"Mebbe they're waiting for something," Isham said.

But he could not guess what it was, and that puzzle was still with him when he sauntered across the yard after supper. He stopped at the well for a drink, then stood for a moment to shape up a cigarette.

CHAPTER FIVE

Night Raiders

MOONLIGHT filtered through the cottonwood's wide-spreading branches, putting delicate patterns of mellow light and shadow across the yard. Isham lighted his cigarette and watched Tod Hook limp toward the bunkhouse. The thought came to him that this little rider shared Pop Biddle's resentment; he had not spoken a dozen words since the old man's departure.

As Isham was about to head for the bunkhouse, Eve Kenyon came out on the stoop. She stood for a moment, framed in the glow of lamplight behind her, then stepped down into the yard and walked slowly toward him.

She was within a few feet of him when Isham said, "It's a fine evening."

He saw her hand come up between her full, firm breasts and saw a startled awareness widen her eyes. She stopped momentarily, as if his presence here was a barrier she would not cross.

"It's beautiful," she murmured, and continued up to the well.

Isham watched her drink. "I'll be leaving soon, Eve. My job here is nearly finished."

She leaned against the well's wooden framework. Her face, turned partly away from him as she gazed out over the moon-drenched hills, seemed entirely passive. But there was a throbbing warmth in her voice when she spoke.

"I shouldn't have treated you so harshly," she murmured. "Perhaps I had no right to judge you. But your coming here seemed the one thing that would bring the trouble I was trying to avoid."

"I don't blame you," Isham said. "Mebbe you were more right than you know."

She kept silent for a time and he finished his cigarette. When he tossed it into the dust he said gently, "There's something I'd like to tell you, before I leave."

Her face turned questioningly toward him. Looking into her studying eyes he saw some swift emotion put a glowing softness in them.

"I know," she whispered. "I felt it too—that day on the hill."

She swayed gently toward him and he drew her suddenly into his arms. The feel of her yielding body put a pounding exultation in him and when he kissed her the fleeting surrender of her lips rocked all his senses. Here, he knew vividly, was an end of loneliness—a woman to cherish, a woman to put fullness into a man's life and make it worth the living. But the menacing shadow of Kid Smith smothered the high flare of his gladness. It pushed him quickly back into the realm of guns and men—and his badge.

As if sensing the bitter turn of his thoughts, Eve drew slowly away. Her hands glided gracefully up to her hair.

"I wish," he muttered, "I was the gun-slick renegade you thought I was."

A startled questioning came into her eyes, quickly changing the tranquil softness of her moonlit face. Then a smile curved her ripe lips and she said earnestly, "If you were—I wouldn't be standing here with you. I knew I was mistaken when you refused to leave, Mike."

Isham stood still, silently regarding her, desperately groping for some words to frame what was in his mind. He could not tell this girl that her brother was a wanted killer—that he had to take Kid Smith back to Texas. For a fleeting moment, with the feel of her lush lips still warm on his mouth, he considered tossing his badge into a deep arroyo. But that temptation was quickly dismissed.

"I stayed," he said finally, "because I owed a debt. When it's paid I'll be going."

Eve was about to make some reply when the steady drumbeat of a hard-ridden horse came plainly to them. They turned quickly to face the San Sabino road and a moment later saw Doc Tucker run a lathered horse into the yard.

THE old medico pulled to a sliding stop in front of the house as Jim Kenyon and Whitey came hurriedly out and Tod Hook limped from the bunkhouse.

"They're coming for Isham!" Doc called excitedly, and got down. "A whole caboodle of 'em!"

Jim Kenyon spat into the dust. "I been expectin' 'em," he muttered. "They're overdue."

Isham followed Eve quickly across the yard. This, he realized, would be the showdown. If Dollard came now the play here was ended, unless—

Isham reached a quick decision. "I'll pull out," he declared, "so there'll be no trouble."

"Yuh ain't got to run," Kenyon said doggedly. "No tin-badge town bum is goin' to frame a man on my payroll!"

"But there's a dozen riders coming with Dollard," Tucker said hastily. "Red Maxon and his crew—besides two-three deputies."

"They sho' like lots o' company," Whitey put in scornfully. "Seems like they should've sent to Texas for some Rangers."

Tod Hook came over to Kenyon. "Isham's right," the little puncher muttered. "If he takes a run-out now it'll save trouble all around. That lawdog means business this time, sure enough."

Isham put a hand on Kenyon's shoulder in a friendly gesture. "I'll be going now," he declared. "I'll hide out in the hills until this blows over."

He glanced at Eve, and tried to fathom the frowning gravity that showed in her moonlit face. He could not decide whether that expression mirrored resentment at the threatened conflict his presence had brought, or regret at his departure. He murmured, *"Hasta la vista,"* and went abruptly to the horse corral.

Five minutes later, with Tod Hook's .45-90 in his scabbard and a sack of food behind his saddle, Isham rode from the KX yard. And he knew now that Eve's frown had indicated regret at his going; she had brought him the food, and a canteen of water.

For a time, while his horse climbed steadily up the slopes west of the ranch, Isham idly considered the tangled skein of events that made this flight necessary. It came to him that Eve's brother had come back to this Basin for a definite purpose—to aid his father against the Bootjack Pool. Strange, Isham thought, that the marshal who had trailed him, trying to stop that return, should now be helping to finish the job Kid Smith had come here to do.

Isham had watched Whitey closely these past few days, trying to understand him, to build some definite pattern that would fit Eve Kenyon's hard-working brother into the same frame with Kid Smith of Texas. But the pattern would not shape into form, nor could he find a way out of the problem that faced him. Remembering Eve's glowing eyes and the soft caress of her lips, he wondered when he would see her again and under what circumstances.

An hour later, as the moon disappeared behind a solid rampart of clouds, Isham lay rolled in his blankets on a rimrock ridge high above the KX. He was tamping out a final cigarette when a ripple of sound drifted raggedly up—and that sound jerked him quickly alert.

Hastily pulling on his boots, Isham ran along the rock-studded crest and gazed down into the velvety gloom below. He picked out darting flashes of orange flame on the valley floor and saw larger blocks of light go out suddenly. The Bootjack posse, he guessed, was attacking the ranch. His absence had not averted trouble. It might have caused this blast of guns. And Eve Kenyon was down there!

Isham ran to his hobbled horse, slapped kak on the animal and rode down the ridge at a lunging run. . . .

JIM KENYON crouched in the unlighted living-room of the KX ranch house, a rifle resting on the window sill in front of him. On the floor, at his side, Eve loaded another gun.

"They've drove Whitey and Tod back into the bunkhouse," he reported, a hushed fury in his voice. "They're gittin' close to the corral gate!"

Doc Tucker spoke from across the room. "Why they trying to turn the horses loose?" he asked. "That won't help them take Isham—or you either."

"They ain't after Isham," Kenyon declared. He emptied the gun and passed it to Eve.

"I know now why they didn't bother us none while we was drivin' beef down to the Rio Pago. They wiated till we finished so they could raid the whole herd. They're trying to put us afoot."

A dark shape skulked around a corner of the wagonshed. Kenyon fingered trigger, the blast of his gun shattering a momentary silence. Then a rattle of gunfire came from behind the wagonshed and slugs slapped viciously at the window frame, driving splinters of wood into the room.

"They'll be comin' in from the other side, now," Kenyon muttered, "and the boys in the bunkhouse can't do no good from there."

Eve heard him mutter profane maledictions on the Bootjack Pool and all its members. His gun barked twice, then he yelled, "Wagonshed's afire!"

The tinder-dry structure blazed into high-riding flames, throwing a bright and lurid light across the yard, plainly illuminating the milling huddle of horses in the corral.

A burst of gunfire was echoed by the shrill scream of a horse.

Looking toward the corral Eve saw a wild-eyed sorrel rear up on its hind legs, pawing the air as if frantic with pain. Then, as the animal went down in a threshing heap, she heard her father say savagely, "The dirty sons are slaughterin' our saddle band!"

Four more horses fell under the steady bark of guns. Eve shuddered at this scene of wanton slaughter, then cried out as she saw Whitey step from the bunkhouse doorway.

He stood for a moment, guns out, and crouching. His face gleamed bright in the flare of flames, a scowling red mask against the burnished silver of his long. blond hair. Then, as Eve sensed what he planned to do, she called excitedly, "Don't Whitey! Go back!"

But the young rider ignored this urgent command. He slid stealthily along the flame-stippled wall while Jim Kenyon cursed softly.

"He ain't got a chance," the old cowman muttered, a sober pride in his voice, "but mebbe he'll make it."

If Whitey could once get around the corner of the bunkhouse he would be in position to drive the horse-killing raiders from their stand in the pepper trees. He continued his methodical step-by-step journey along the wall, flattening himself against the 'dobe in a desperate endeavor to escape the yonder gunmen's attention.

But that journey was abruptly halted. A guttural yell from the trees was followed by a savage fusillade of bullets and Whitey lurched drunkenly away from the wall. He crouched for a moment, facing the hidden guns, then swayed forward in a staggering attempt to complete his journey. He was within a foot of the corner, and shelter, when a bullet sent him sprawling face down in the dust.

Jim Kenyon strode quickly to the door, yanked it open.

"Where you going?" Tucker demanded.

"I'm goin' to bring Whitey in," Kenyon said dully. "He can't lay there all alone."

Doc Tucker grunted. "You'll never get to him, Jim. You can't help him. You'll be downed in ten feet."

"I'm tryin'," Kenyon declared.

He stepped into the yard and ran toward his son. Luck favored him. No searching bullet found a home. Then two of the raiders rode at him, guns blasting.

Jim triggered four shots, sending them scurrying for cover. He eased Whitey over his shoulder and, staggering under the boy's weight, made his way back to the house.

Suddenly, a rifle blasted from a low mesa south of the yard, its report booming loudly above the bark of revolvers and the sharp crackle of flames. Again and again its heavy crash came rolling across the yard, louder and more distinct as the sniping slaughter suddenly ceased at the corral.

"It's Mike Isham!" Eve cried hysterically. "He's come back!"

Then, as the rifle roared again, she heard a dull rumble of hoofbeats that grew suddenly into a staccato drumbeat of sound and she saw horsemen charge in frantic retreat beyond the shadowed corrals.

"He drove them off!" Doc Tucker shouted, his voice sounding shrill in the sudden silence. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

When Buzzards Die

MIKE ISHAM rode down the mesa's steep slope at a gallop. He saw a light go on in the house and glimpsed hurrying figures crossing the yard. When he jogged into the yard Tod Hook stood by the well, methodically dipping water and dousing it over a bloody arm.

"Yuh got here just in time," he muttered, "mebbe a little late—for Whitey."

Isham glanced at the house. "He stop lead?" he asked.

"Yeah—plenty."

Isham went into the kitchen and saw Doc Tucker hunched over Whitey's still form on the table. Eve stood beside the

medico, her hands busy with blood-stained bandages while Jim Kenyon grimly watched.

Whitey looked up as Isham stepped around the table. "We stood 'em off again," he muttered weakly.

Isham nodded and saw Eve's hand smoothed back Whitey's touseled hair. A grimace of pain turned the young rider's face starkly pale. "Next time we'll lick 'em—final," he said hoarsely. His eyes held Isham in a tight squint. "Then we'll—"

His voice trailed off in a wheezing sigh and that sound merged with Eve's sudden sobbing as Isham went out into the yard.

Tod Hook asked, "Whitey done for?"

Isham nodded, and went on to his horse. The Bootjack Pool, he thought grimly, had settled his score with Kid Smith. Now he would square his debt with Doc Tucker—final!

* * *

Morning sun turned Main Street's deep dust a tawny yellow. It put a brassy heat on Mike Isham's face, starkly etching his sober features as he rode into San Sabino. He dismounted in front of the Wells Fargo building and went wearily into the stage office.

"When," he asked, "does the next mail go through to Tucson?"

"Stage is due now," the attendant drawled and consulted his watch. "It'll roll in any minute, now."

Isham asked for a pencil and paper, and an envelope. Then he lighted a cigarette, smoking it down until it burned his fingers before he picked up the pencil.

The writing, once started, was soon completed.

Solemnly, as a man who has signed away something of value, Isham read what he had written. The letter was addressed to the U. S. Marshal at Phoenix. It said:

"This is to tell you that I have resigned. I've got some personal work to do that I couldn't finish with a badge."

Then he dug the badge from his pocket, juggled it absently for a moment, and slipped it into the envelope. Sealing it carefully, he handed the envelope to the attendant.

"See that this goes on the stage," he ordered, then went on out to the sun-scorched sidewalk.

When he reached the Dixie Hotel, Pop Biddle came down the steps. The old man's face held a tense expectancy. "What happened at KX last night?" he demanded.

Isham stopped. "Bootjack raid," he said dryly. "Why?"

"Dollard just turned me loose. They's three wounded riders usin' the jail bunks and Red Maxon's raisin' hell 'cause he cain't find Doc Tucker. Anybody git hurt at KX?"

"Yeah," Isham drawled. "Whitey was dying when I left."

Biddle cursed. "I knew yuh'd bring trouble!" he rasped savagely. "Now yuh'r runnin' out!"

Isham smiled mockingly. "I'm not running," he snapped. "I've got some business to finish with Red Maxon and Dollard—and Banker Tate Fay."

THE brittle edge of his voice held a cutting anger. It put a puzzled expression in Biddle's faded eyes. "Yuh mean yuh'r goin' to shoot it out with 'im, now?"

Isham nodded, and Biddle said quickly, "I'll string along with yuh, Isham."

"No," Isham said caustically. "This job's for a gunhawk—a professional. Get back into the hotel."

Biddle's face flushed angrily. He opened his lips to speak but Isham snarled, "You ran out on KX. Now stay out! Vamoose!"

Biddle recognized the chill threat that had turned Isham's eyes tightly menac-

ing. He turned and went forlornly up the hotel steps.

At that moment, as Isham started across the wide street, Sheriff Dollard and Red Maxon appeared at the foot of the bank stairway. Isham halted momentarily, tilting his hat against the sun's bright glare. He saw the sheriff and Maxon take up positions at either side of the doorway, warily waiting. There was no mistaking their intention now. They were ready for the kill!

Some slight movement in the window above them caught Isham's attention, and Tate Fay's presence there registered on the fringe of his vision. The odds here, he knew quickly, were well stacked against him and that knowledge brought but one regret. He had probably seen Eve Kenyon for the last time, and he had not said good-bye. . . .

A trickle of sweat slid along Isham's face as he moved forward. Putting thought of Tate Fay's ghoulish perch from his mind, he watched the two ahead of him intently, waiting for the signal he knew would come. The thought came to him that they were waiting too long, that the closer he got the better his chances would be.

He was within twenty-five feet of the bank when he saw Red Maxon's thick lips spasmodically tighten. That sight put Isham into instant action—swift, fluidly-smooth motions that brought his guns clear of leather a split-second ahead of the two in front of him.

As his guns bucked in his hands Isham heard an explosion behind him and vaguely wondered what it could be. Then a slug whangled viciously past his face and the street echoed to the crash and roar of blasting guns.

Red Maxon fell back against the bank wall immediately, guns dangling clumsily. Isham put another slug at the redhead and saw death wilt this man's hulking frame. But Sheriff Dollard, jerked sideways by that first blast, swiveled suddenly around and thumbed his six-shooters.

A bullet put a burning crease across Isham's cheek. He sent three shots at Dollard, the explosions making one continuous roll of sound. The big lawman's weapons tipped slowly down, as if stubbornly forcing the hands that held them, and Isham saw a stony blankness come into his bulging eyes.

For a long moment the big-bellied lawman teetered drunkenly. Then he slid slowly down and sat staring through dead, sightless eyes.

The street became suddenly quiet. Isham glanced up at the bank window and saw Tate Fay's gaunt frame draped grotesquely across the sill. The banker's buzzard head hung loosely, blood coursing fanwise across his high-beaked face. It came to Isham then that Pop Biddle had fulfilled his offer to side him—the old cowpuncher had cut down the odds.

Then, as men ran from the Palace Saloon and the Mercantile Store, Isham saw two hard-ridden horses swing into the street from the north. A moment later Eve Kenyon and Tod Hook pulled up beside him.

Eve slid to the ground and came quickly to him. Her eyes darted to the bleeding gash in his face and she asked anxiously, "You all right, Mike?"

Isham nodded, dully conscious of a growing amazement. Why had this girl deserted her dead brother. He saw a sighing relief soften her features and wondered if his eyes were playing tricks on him. This couldn't be real.

"Why," he asked wonderingly, "did you come here?"

"Tod told me you had gone. I—I came to say good-bye."

ISHAM holstered his smoking guns. The job here, he thought grimly, was finished. But Whitey Kenyon had not

lived to see it completed. "I'm sure sorry about Whitey," he said softly. "Mebbe I should have left when you asked me to, that day on the hill."

"Whitey's going to get well," Eve declared gladly. "Doc said to tell you he was another one that's too tough to die."

A flooding gladness surged through Isham's veins. Whitey Kenyon had lived to see the Bootjack Pool wiped out of existence! At that moment, as the Tucson stage rumbled away from the Wells Fargo office, he suddenly remembered the three bullets that had brought him back to Bootjack Basin. But his marshal's badge had gone with the stage and with it his lawdog duty against Kid Smith.

Isham looked at Eve. Remembering the first time he had seen her, over there in the Dixie doorway, he smiled reflectively.

"You sure," he asked solemnly, "that you want to say good-bye?"

Eve's glowing eyes steadily met his questing gaze. "No Mike—and you?"

"No," Isham said huskily, and saw that her curving lips held an intimate smile as they walked slowly across the street.

THE END

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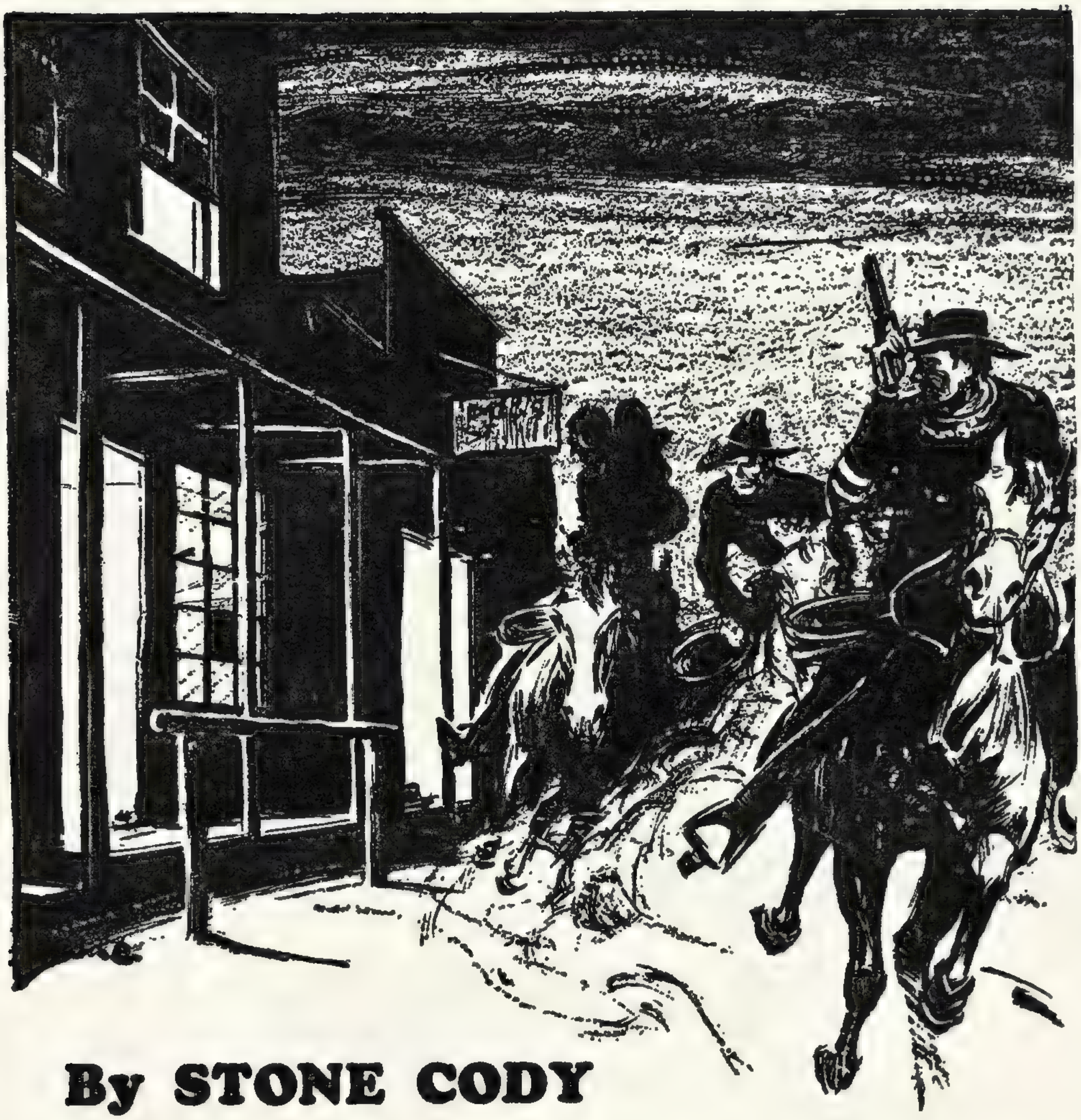


By STONE CODY

If young Tip Langley could keep his back-trail covered, he could look forward to years as an honest, respected cowman. Yet on a certain grim night of gunflame, Tip pounded into Devil's Butte, to condemn himself to prison and disgrace—or his own adopted outfit to perdition and death!

CHAPTER ONE

Death at Devil's Butte

THE blizzard had blotted out the formidable bulk of Devil's Butte and the seven men who ploughed through that swirling murk kept the wind at their backs to guide them southward. Winter, roaring across northern Montana, voiced its icy challenge, defying spring to dethrone it. These men hadn't counted on a blizzard in April when they had held up the G. N. Flyer at Chinook twelve hours before. But at least this last snowstorm would cover their tracks, freeze the enthusiasm of pursuing posses.

Young Tip Langley, riding well to the front, weighed these factors listlessly as he pulled his sombrero over his lean, frost-

THE OWLHOOT POSSE

With guns out, they roared through the sleeping town. . . .

Powerful outlaw novelette

masked face, buried his rocky chin deeper in his mackinaw. Tip Langley wasn't concerned about capture. For Long Tom Langley, gaunt leader of the bunch, was weaving in his saddle, dying from a bullet he had packed out of Chinook. It wasn't in Tip to think about himself when Long Tom's hours were numbered.

Grief sagged the six-foot-two of Tip Langley over his saddlehorn—grief for Long Tom. Tip had been riding with the bunch for almost a year now. Before that, life had been milestoned by a series of hideout ranches where Tip had grown up. Living always under the shadow of the owlhoot had inured Tip to a lot of things. But it didn't make it easier to know that Long Tom was dying.

The others were concerned too. Preacher Pitt, the pious-faced, long-haired second-in-command, crowded up, leaned anxiously forward. "How you feeling, Tom?"

The question jarred Long Tom from his lethargy. Raising pain-glazed eyes, he tried to peer through the curtain of snow.

"Call the boys up here, Preacher," he ordered. "I got somethin' to say and I ain't feelin' like hollerin'."

PITT raised his voice and the men surrounded Langley, a semi-circle, looking like so many frosted gnomes. Besides the Preacher there was Limpy Yule, stoved-up owlhoot veteran and the dark-skinned Marias Kid, the newest recruit. And there were the Burr twins, squat and black-bearded, as alike as any two cartridges in the belts that circled their mackinaws. All save the Kid and Tip had followed Long Tom for many years.

Langley spoke to his lieutenant. "Preacher, I reckon yuh can find that hollow tree along Antelope Crick where we cached the loot?"

Pitt spat with the wind. "Reckon so," he drawled in that nasal twang of his. "Besides, you'll be with us when we get it."

"Maybe," Long Tom countered. "I just wanted to make shore yuh knew the landmarks. But I called yuh boys to ask yuh to ride on ahead. This slug I'm packin' slows me but Tip and me'll catch up pronto."

Limpy Yule brushed an icicle from his lyre-shaped moustache. "Yuh're lyin', Tom," he said without rancor. "Yuh're worse hit than yuh'll say and yuh figger yuh're holdin' us back. It won't work, savvy? Why, most of us has slowed yuh down for the same reason, some time or other. We ain't partin'."

A pain-tinged grin spread across Long Tom's leathery face. "Why, yuh busted-down old has-been," he retorted. "Yuh think I'm worryin' about yore mangey carcass? They's things I aim to tell my boy and I ain't wantin' a bunch of long-eared jackasses hornin' in. Now you move ahead!"

They moved. They had never questioned the authority of Long Tom Langley and they did not question it now. But when the veiling storm closed behind them, the grin faded from Langley's face and his eyes were thoughtful when he turned them on Tip.

"Yonder rides the best bunch that ever followed a gent down to hell and back," Long Tom said. "Chalk that in yore tally-book, Tip. Yuh'll find good and bad on both sides of the law, but yuh won't find boys like mine everyplace."

"I'm thinking so," Tip agreed. "What did you want to talk about, Dad?"

"About you, son—and me," Long Tom said. "They's a time when things has got to be said—and this is it. I've stopped enough slugs to know the right one. I won't be makin' it to the hideout."

A wave of his hand silenced Tip. "No use stringin' each other along, Tip," he said. "Time's too short for lyin'. We both know damn well Preacher'll be roddin' the bunch tomorrow. But tomorrow I want yuh to start ridin' the straight trail."

"Leave the bunch!" Tip protested. "But you said—"

"I said them boys'd do to ride the river with," Long Tom conceded. "I meant it. But the owlhoot ain't for you, son. That's why I've give yuh chores that kept yuh out of the picture so's the law has no claim on yuh today. For more'n a year I've wanted to tell yuh why, but I never assayed enough guts. I gotta tell yuh tonight."

"Meanin'?" Tip asked, tight-lipped.

Long Tom halted his horse, pointed into the darkness.

"Over there, someplace, is Devil's Butte," he said. "It's been a long time since I've been hereabouts. But I'm thinkin' Somebody shuffled the cards tonight, arrangin' so's yuh and me'd say so-long right where we first met. Yuh see, Tip, yuh ain't my boy."

Tip fumbled for the saddle horn, found

it, squeezed it hard. "Dad," he choked. "You're lyin'!"

"No, son, I ain't. Lots of times I've wished it was a lie. But I found yuh wanderin' around these hills fifteen years ago, a mighty hungry little button. A heap o' wagons was headin' through here in them days, pilgrims from Missouri, comin' to settle. I always figgered yuh tumbled from one of them wagons. But I couldn't look for yore maw and paw then, with a posse crowdin' my heels. I took yuh to a hideout near the Border. 'Fore I come this way again, I'd begun to think a heap o' yuh and I'm admittin' I didn't look very hard for yore folks."

TIP LANGLEY, listened in stunned silence, knew a numbness the cold didn't bring. No man in all of his crowded years had ever measured up to Long Tom Langley in his eyes. And Long Tom was no kin of his! The thought of it locked his tongue, flooded him with a great bitterness.

"That's why you gotta go straight," Long Tom continued. "Yuh must 'a' come from good stock, Tip. Yuh've proved that. And maybe, someday, yuh'll find yore real folks. I owe 'em something, Tip —owe 'em for keepin' yuh for myself. Maybe they'll hate me a little less if yuh're ridin' straight when yuh meet."

"To hell with it!" Tip blurted, and the ejaculation loosened the words that clogged his throat. "You said you cottoned to me. I reckon you know what I've thought of you—and Preacher and Limpy and the rest. I ain't ashamed of the trail them gents ride. It's good enough for me—"

"No!" The savage force of the word sent Long Tom swaying in the saddle. "Yuh don't know what yuh're sayin', Tip. Yuh don't know what it means to ride the owlhoot. Don't yuh reckon Preacher an' me and the others has ached for a home and a woman's love and a family—things we could never have? I know, Tip. That's why I hung on to yuh when I had no right. That's why I want yuh to be different. I—"

Long Tom's words trailed away as he clutched frantically for the saddle horn. He lurched, pitched from the saddle. Tip slid from his own kak in a blur of motion. Then he was crouching in the snow, cradling Long Tom in his arms. The face of the outlaw leader was chalky but his eyes were still open. They probed Tip.

"I—told yuh I knew the right slug," Long Tom jerked. "Are yuh promisin', Tip?"

And Tip Langley, hearing the rustle of death's dark wings, knew he would bind himself to anything if his vow would bring happiness to ease this last minute for the man he loved above all others.

"I promise," he said softly.

Long Tom's hand met his and the older man's fist was cold when the others rode back to ring them—five men who stood silently in the snow, their heads bared.

Preacher Pitt, his eyes lifted upwards, spoke, "He's rode his last trail," he said. "May He who marks the sparrow's fall smooth the bumps of his new trail."

And Tip Langley, the snow dusting his bared, tawny head, remembered his promise. For himself, also, an old trail had ended and, stretching into the distance, was the new trail he had promised to ride.

CHAPTER TWO

A Hand for the Flying H

A MONTH had wrought its miracle when Tip Langley rode into the town of Devil's Butte. A belated spring had whisked the snow from the rangeland, replacing it with an endless sea of sage that was broken only by the town itself; a cluster of buildings sprawling in the shadow of the half-grown mountain that gave them a name.

For Tip, Devil's Butte was the beginning and the end of a great circle of cattle country he had covered in the weeks since he had left the bunch. Tip was searching for work—honest work—but he had studiously avoided Devil's Butte.

Somewhere in this section his parents might be living. But Tip wasn't concerned about that. For the very thing that might have drawn him to Devil's Butte had kept him away. His word bound him to his new venture but he was satisfied to remember Long Tom as his father. Tip wanted no other kin.

And possibly Long Tom had lied. That story of the past might have been designed as an incentive to force Tip to better himself. If that were so, there was no reason why Tip should shun Devil's Butte. Ranchers who had no openings had mentioned jobs to be found in that section.

SO Tip Langley was walking his mount along the town's main street, his owl-hoot-trained eyes scanning the weather-battered buildings, studying the faded signs. At the outskirts of the town he found a formidable L-shaped building that housed the jail and the sheriff's office. Tip had learned that the law, ancient enemy of his kind, always knew which spreads were apt to be hiring hands.

Sheriff Sherm Markham, then, might save him a lot of useless riding. The irony of it spread a grin across Tip's sun-stained face. He had heard the name of Sherm Markham cursed in many a dark-trail camp and he had even glimpsed the blocky, gray-haired lawdog on two occasions. Markham, the sheriff who scorned the aid of deputies, was a relentless man-hunter whose fame had lapped far over the boundary of his own county. Now he was calling on Markham!

Three horses crowded the hitch-rail before the sheriff's office. Tip added his long-legged roan and strode forward, his tread cat-like, unintentionally silent, his twin guns swinging from his thighs. Pausing before the door, he heard a snatch of conversation from within.

He could glimpse Markham seated behind a desk and, in another chair, his back to Tip, sat a bald man with a fringe of graying hair. The slight form of a girl filled a third chair. Markham was talking and the words rooted Tip.

"—I've been in the saddle day and night," the sheriff was saying. "I'm told Long Tom Langley and his bunch headed this way after that holdup at Chinook. I got back to town this mornin' but I ain't had time to find out what's goin' on hereabouts."

"Plenty's been goin' on," the bald oldster spluttered. "And plenty more's gonna happen, Sherm. Jake Storme's threatenin' to fence off the springs between our spreads. They'll be hell to pay if he does. Them springs is on my land, even if me and Cal Foster did share 'em when Cal owned the X-in-a-Hat. When Jake bought the spread I aimed to let him use the water likewise. But Jake claims it's his, figgers on hoggin' it. I'm tellin' yuh, Sherm; Jake may be an old-timer hereabouts but since he got the X his ideas has got too big for his head!"

"Shore—shore," Markham interjected. "But the springs is on your Flying H. You can prove that."

"Yeah—in court," the Flying H man snapped. "But I can't water cattle next summer with court actions. I know yuh don't want trouble in yore county and yuh and me is old friends. But if Jake Storme makes a play I ain't waitin' for the law to straighten things out, Sherm. The Flying H'll ride to war. And how'll yuh stand?"

"I'll stand for no lawlessness," Markham snapped. "I'm wantin' no range war hereabouts. And I'm takin' no personal sides. It'll be too bad for them that fires the first guns. My advice is to wait until court to settle this and—"

Tip stole away. He had been anchored, first by the mention of Long Tom's name and then by the urgency in the voice of the Flying H man. But this was none of his business. And this was not the time to call on Sherm Markham.

CROSSING the street to lounge before the nearest saloon, Tip digested the things he had heard and felt a growing contempt for Sheriff Sherm Markham. Obviously Markham was an old friend of the Flying H owner, yet the sheriff wanted to wait the decision of a slow-moving court while a range-hog stole the water of his friend. This for the sake of law and order! It didn't make sense to Tip.

He saw the man and girl leave the sheriff's office and he had his first real look at them. The man was close to sixty, a grizzled little oldster, but he carried the weight of his years well. But it was the girl who really riveted Tip's attention. Black curls peeped beneath her sombrero to match her dark eyes and ring an oval face. Riding garb could not disguise the alluring feminity of her.

The pair left their horses at the rail and crossed the street to stride along the board walk toward Tip. He kept his eyes on the girl, only tearing his gaze away when she had passed. She was pretty, as pretty as any girl he had ever seen, but in the simple act of walking down the street she had come into his life and gone out of it again—probably forever. Or so he reckoned. And then a man slid through the saloon's doors, blocked the pair.

"Been calling on the sheriff, eh Conroy," he barked. "Can't the Flying H handle its affairs without runnin' cryin' to the law?"

Tip eyed the man and knew instinctively that this was Jake Storme of the X-in-a-Hat. The fellow was tall, as tall as Tip, and blocky of build. He was overly dressed in a combination of range and town garb that included a flat-crowned sombrero and a suit with the trouser legs tucked into hand-tooled botts. There was nothing about florid-faced, arrogant Jake Storme that Tip liked.

Storme's words spun Conroy and the girl, and Tip saw anger flood the oldster's face. "What I do is none of yore damn business," Conroy spat. "Get out of my way!"

"You had your crew backin' you when you run me off your spread," Storme sneered. "Now you're alone, you ain't so anxious to shoot off your face."

"Harriet, here, didn't figger yore marriage proposal was any bargain," Conroy retorted. "Yuh're a younger man than me, Storme, but yuh're still old enough to be this gal's father. That ain't the point. I run yuh off the place 'cause yuh ain't fit for my gal. It holds that we ain't hankerin' tuh stand here and gab with yuh now."

"Meanin' the Conroys is too god for me—on the range or in town," the big man roared. "Why you old coot—!"

Then Storme struck the Flying H man. It was an open-handed blow but it sent Conroy reeling. Recovering his balance, the oldster stabbed for the gun at his hip and Jake Storme moved in a like gesture. Conroy's hand was the slower. Tip knew that before his eyes registered the fact, for Tip was beginning to savvy the whole play.

Jake Storme, for all of his blustering, was not angry. Rather, he was calculatingly cool. His every word and move had been designed to force Conroy to gun-play. And because Jake Storme wanted gun-play, Tip knew Storme was prepared to outmatch the oldster. This was murder. Tip was sure of it and his own gun cleared leather.

Devil's Butte echoed its thunder. Conroy, startled, paused with his weapon half-drawn. Jake Storme stared at his own hand in stupefied amazement for Tip's bullet had shattered the big man's gun,

numbed his hand. And Tip, goaded by hot wrath, was lunging forward. His right arm swung and knuckles cracked against Storme's chin. The man lunged backward, off the sidewalk, to sprawl on the street.

Tip, thumbs hooked in cartridge belt, watched Storme pick himself from the ground. For an instant the eyes of the two men locked as Storme slowly looked the youngster up and down, measuring him from scuffed boots to high-peaked sombrero. And Tip read implacable hatred and cold deadly rage in the other's stare.

"You rake this pot, younker," the man said at last and caressed his numbed hand. "But we'll meet again, savvy?"

Tip shrugged, watched Storme stride toward the saloon. Conroy was standing with outstretched hand before the doors banged shut.

"Name's Walt Conroy," the oldster said. "I'm thankin' yuh, stranger. I reckon yuh saved me from doin' exactly what that skunk aimed for me to do."

Tip took the proferred hand. "I'm Lang —Tip Lang," he said in turn. "Just ridin' through, lookin' for a job. Glad to have been around to help."

"Lookin' for a job," the oldster repeated. "I could use a hand out to my Flying H, I'm thinkin'. What do yuh say?"

Then the girl crowded forward. Color had brightened her cheeks and she smiled in frank approval as her eyes met Tip's. "I'm Harriet Conroy," she said. "I'm thanking you, too, for aiding dad—and I hope you'll come and work for us."

Tip matched her smile. Here was the honest work he was seeking, handed to him on a platter. Here was a chance to carry out his promise and ride the straight trail. And Jake Storme's veiled threat hinted that the straight trail wouldn't be dull in this Devil's Butte country.

"I reckon your dad's hired hisself a hand," Tip said.

CHAPTER THREE

Rangeland Code

MENACE hung over the Flying H, a black cloud that might spit its lightning any day. Because of that, Tip Langley fitted easily into life at the spread. Here was the same spine-tingling anticipation he had often felt when Long Tom Langley's bunch had eased into a cowtown for some quick foray. Here was danger. It made the transformation from owlhooter to cowhand easier for the youngster who had been reared with peril.

The half-dozen hands of the H accepted him readily enough. And Tip, hungry these past weeks for the companionship he had denied himself, came to like them too. From Utah Weaver, the weather-warped old foreman down to Button Gregg, a team-age youngster, they were a loyal, salty, hard-riding crew.

It was Utah Weaver who schooled Tip in the fine points of cow-punching although Tip, having learned a bit about range work on the various ranches where Long Tom had hidden him, was already a passable hand. But Utah Weaver could give lessons to the best and Tip appreciated the tutelage and the company of the man.

From Utah, Tip garnered much about the Devil's Butte range. Utah was an old-timer who had come to the section with Walt Conroy years before. Thus Tip learned the history of Jake Storme who had insidiously built himself from a small rancher to a range power able to buy the X-in-a-Hat when Cal Foster had died, leaving no heirs. Ruthlessness had marked Jake Storme's ascendancy, according to Utah. Tip, who had sampled Storme's methods, believed him.

Harriet Conroy often rode with the new hand. And it was because of her that Tip began to forget the lure of the dark trails with their spice of danger, even when the passing days might have made ranch life

monotonous. Jake Storme was biding his time, and peace became the order of the day. Tip endured it easily in Harriet's company. The girl rode with the crew as often as not and could do the work of any of them. Tip marveled and admired and forgot his yesterdays under the spell of her magic.

Peaceful, passing days .... Walt Conroy keeping a weather eye on the springs, waiting for Storme to act .... The bunkhouse echoing to talk of the coming roundup .... Tip moulding himself to his new life, happy in the company of Utah and Harriet. And then, with the Flying H lulled into a fancied security, Jake Storme struck.

Destiny decreed that Tip should be on hand when the news came. He, Utah and Conroy were working at the big corral behind the ranchhouse, while Harriet and the riders were somewhere out on the range. And Tip, his eyes often on the horizon, was the first to see a horseman thundering across the flats, beelining toward them. There was something of desperation about that low-bent rider that straightened Tip, whispered warning.

"Looks like news is coming," he reflected aloud and pointed.

Then the rider was skidding into the ranch yard, flinging himself from the saddle. It was Button Gregg, hatless and disheveled. His right arm, bloody and torn, hung limply at his side.

"Storme," he gasped. "He grabbed Harriet. We was ridin' alone, near the line. He had all his men, a dozen or so!"

Walt Conroy, his face ashen, was beside the boy in one swift stride, his fingers digging into Button's good arm. "What yuh sayin'?" he demanded. "My gal—!"

"They plugged me 'fore I got my gun uncorked!" the boy shrilled. "Jake give me a note for you." He fished into a pocket with his left hand, extended a crumpled page from a tally-book.

While the old man read, Tip waited, impatient as a caged cougar. Inside of him an overmastering wrath was kindling, a wrath that matched Conroy's as the rancher wadded the paper, hurled it to the ground.

"The stinkin' polecat," he stormed. "Says he's takin' her to his line shack up the butte. Says if I want her back I'm to come alone and sign the springs over to him. He knows damn well the courts'll uphold me and he knows I'll fight for the water meanwhile. Now he's warrin' on women to make me give in—" Choked by his own anger, he paused, spun on Tip.

"That spindle-shanked roan of yourn is the fastest piece o' horseflesh on this spread," he snapped. "Screw gear on him and round up the boys. We might as well wipe out that nest o' snakes now. No sense in me goin' alone. Storme wouldn't let me or the gal go even if I give him the springs. He wouldn't dare."

TIP exploded into action. He was straddling the top pole of the corral when Utah Weaver's voice arrested him. The old foreman had fire in his eyes but he spoke softly.

"Reckon we'd better chew this over," he advised. "Seein' as how Storme's got a dozen hombres at his heel, looks like we'd be bitin' off a heap—which is likely what he wants. 'Pears to me they's more here than what meets the eye."

"What yuh drivin' at?" Conroy demanded.

"Kidnappin' women is hanging business hereabouts," Utah reminded him. "Even if Jake got yuh to give him the springs, lock, stock and barrel, he couldn't make it stick in any court when his methods got known. Fact is, he'd be danglin' long 'fore court met. So it 'pears he's runnin' a sandy with his invite for yuh to come alone. He figgers yuh'll come burnin' leather with yore crew behind yuh, just like yuh're rarin' to do, Walt, and he'll be ready. He's aimin' on a wipe-out which he'll cover up

afterwards. Yuh agreein' with me, Tip?"

The question slowed Tip. Like Walt Conroy, he was burning for action, eager to raid X territory in reprisal. But the cold logic of Utah Weaver had its sobering effect. This deal was too much like that other, in town. It smacked of the same brand of trickery. Truly, Walt Conroy was again preparing to act in the very manner Jake Storme would expect.

"I'm thinkin' you're dead right, Utah," Tip admitted reluctantly.

Walt Conroy was convinced, too. He scratched his bald spot in perplexity. "Sherm Markham!" he finally ejaculated. "That gent's a bear-cat for law an' order. Here's his chance to dish some out. Push that hoss of yourn into town, Tip, and tell him what's goin' on. Have him round up a dozen gents and high-tail it here. Meantime, I'll gather our boys. When yuh get back we'll be callin' on the X-in-a-Hat!"

Tip accepted the commission gladly. In a matter of minutes he was feeding steel to his mount, pounding toward Devil's Butte. He would far rather have been riding to the X, carrying the war to the enemy, but he knew this course was better. Still, he ached for action and he satisfied the desire by goading his horse.

Jake Storme had the temerity to lay hands on a woman in a land where womanhood was inviolable. Tip's fury flamed anew with the thought of it. But as his mount ate away the miles Tip knew it was not because of a violation of a standard respected by honest men and outlaws alike that made his hands itch for the feel of Storme's beefy throat. The girl involved was Harriet. And it came to Tip, with the suddenness that night comes to the high country, that he loved the girl.

He—Tip Langley—was in love. Startled by the realization, he assayed himself. He was, at best, the son of an outlaw or a rangeland waif without even a name to offer her. He was nothing and less than nothing. Now he knew what Long Tom had meant when the dying outlaw had spoken of a home and a woman's love and a family. But, by the grace of Long Tom's foresight, these things might yet be his.

Shaking his tawny head angrily, he discarded his notions. This wasn't the time to be mooning about himself. He had a chore to do and Harriet's safety depended upon him.

Thus he skirted the springs, bubbling crimson in the dying sunlight, grimly prophetic of the blood that might be spilled before another sunset. Thus he raced across the rangeland in the descending darkness until the lights of Devil's Butte twinkled ahead.

WHEN he thundered into town his approach brought him to the rear of the jail building. Here he slithered to a stop, flung himself from the saddle. Was Markham in the building? The thought chilled Tip, reminding him that he was a stranger here, that precious minutes might be lost if he had to search for the man. Rounding a corner, he silently prayed that he would find the sheriff at his desk. It was then a voice hissed his name.

"Tip! Tip Langley!"

Tip froze. No mistaking that nasal twang. His eyes, probing the shadows, found a cell window set in the wall and, framed in that barred square, was the pious face of Preacher Pitt. Behind the outlaw Tip glimpsed others—Limpy Yule, and one of the Burr twins.

"The bunch!" Tip gasped.

"We're all here," Preacher whispered. "Every man. Come back to get that train loot and damned if this lone-wolf sheriff didn't bag us, one at a time from behind, like we was so many yearlin's."

"But Markham—the sheriff!"

"He's alone in his office," Pitt said. "Gettin' us was a stroke of luck for him but I'm thinkin' his luck's played out. I reckon you'll have this jail peeled off us pronto, Tip!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Double-Barreled Showdown

TO EVERY man who changes trails there comes, through the shuffling of the cards, a moment when he must choose again between the old trail and the new. Tip Langley knew such a moment as he stood there in the shadows that shrouded the jail and listened to the voice of Preacher Pitt.

No sign of his inner turmoil showed on his lean face as he hesitated. Walt Conroy was counting the hours, waiting for him to bring Sherm Markham and a posse. But Langley's bunch wanted him to free them from that same Sherm Markham. If he aided them he would be irrevocably stamped with the mark of the owlhoot but, worse yet, the Flying H would ride against unbeatable odds.

Yet Pitt and the others were counting on him. He hadn't voiced his intentions when he had quit them weeks before and they couldn't know what his aid would cost.

There was only one out and Tip, wrestling with his problem, found it. Here were five men, fighters all. They were worth a dozen of the saloon loafers who would form the hastily-organized posse he had been sent for. Pitt's men, free, could ride with the Flying H this night. Afterwards they would vanish—and Tip would have to vanish with them. It would be the end of his brief dream of happiness and his promise to Long Tom. But Long Tom the jail and listened to the voice of Preach- would want it this way, he knew. His mind set, his face became resolute.

"I'm sidin' you," Tip said.

Hurrying up the steps, he shoved his way into the sheriff's office. The blocky bulk of Sherm Markham was squeezed into a chair behind the desk. Something in Tip's face brought the lawman to his feet.

Tip, his eyes on Markham, knew his chore might not be easy. There was strength in the sheriff's tall, solid body, strength in his rocky face.

"I'm from the Flying H," Tip stammered. He had to say something, anything, to hold the attention of this steely-eyed lawman while he closed the distance between them. Then Tip's hand moved toward his holster.

Sherm Markham saw that movement—and duplicated it. But Markham was too late. Tip's hand flashed upward, gun-laden but he didn't shoot. He remembered his contempt, born of his eavesdropping on the day he had come to Devil's Butte, but he had no hankerin' for the blood of Sherm Markham. His gun arced, the barrel crashing across Markham's gray thatch and the sheriff slumped to the floor.

A ring of keys lay on the desk. Tip snatched them, stampeded into the jail corridor. In a minute he was leading Langley's bunch into the office where they found their guns in a desk drawer. Armed again, they followed Tip from the building.

It had all been ridiculously simple and it continued to be simple for the outlaws' horses were in the stable that flanked the jail-building. Unchallenged, but with eyes wary and guns out, they roared through the sleeping town, and were soon galloping across the prairie, their backs to Devil's Butte.

Now there was time for back-slapping and hand-shaking and Tip took both with a grin. Limpy Yule voiced a wild cowboy yell, the kind that had echoed on the trail from Texas. "Long Tom's bunch," he finished. "Ridin' together."

Long Tom's bunch—together! The sound of it thrilled Tip, sent his blood racing, made the slap of the night-breeze sweet against his face. Then, as a shadow crosses the moon, so his thoughts were darkened as he remembered what lay ahead and the price he would have to pay for this forbidden moment. Preacher Pitt, his wild mane flying, had eased up

beside him. Tip talked—short, clipped sentences that told plenty.

The Preacher snorted. "Do I get this straight, Tip?" he asked. "You was sent to the sheriff for help—and you tossed away your chance? Why, man—!"

The story sifted back among the riders. Limpy Yule greeted it with another rebel yell while the Burr twins, silent always, only nodded. The Marias Kid scowled and looked to his guns. It was six fighting men who rode into the Flying H two hours later to find Walt Conroy with his little crew bunched before the one-story ranchhouse.

"These gents are my friends," Tip reported tersely. "I brought 'em instead of the sheriff. Any one of 'em can give the X gun lessons."

WALT CONROY, flanked by Utah, looked them over; his face dark. Plainly he didn't like this miscarriage of orders; but at the same time he was measuring these men, noting the stamp of warriors upon them. Whether he would have demanded an explanation then and there, Tip was never to know for Preacher Pitt, ready of tongue, broke the tension.

" 'Pears we're burnin' a lot of nighttime, Mister Conroy," he reflected. "Reckon we ought to be ridin' if we aim to get your girl back."

The remark wrought its magic. "Yuh're dead right, stranger," Conroy conceded and jerked into action. "Straddle yore cayuses, boys. We're callin on the X."

There was a rush for horses and, with Conroy leading, the combined force headed toward the dark bulk of Devil's Butte. Button Gregg had been left behind which made an even dozen in the party. Tip noted the number with grim satisfaction. The X crew also numbered twelve but Long Tom's men could outmatch those hired hands of the enemy spread.

The climbing moon hung overhead lantern-like when they neared their destination and left their horses to steal ahead on foot. Here the table-level rangeland gave way to broken country with rearing bluffs and criss-crossing coulees. Walt Conroy massed his force in the shadow of one of the bluffs.

"T'other side o' this hill sits the shack," he informed them hoarsely. "We'll have a look-see first."

With Preacher, Utah and Tip, the old rancher crept around the bluff. They saw the X line shack ahead, its single window a square of orange as a light burned within. Behind the place was a fair-sized peeled-pole corral, jammed with horses which appeared to be saddled.

"Looks like the whole pack o' 'em is inside," Conroy whispered triumphantly, as they rejoined the others. "All we got to do is surround 'em, rush in."

Utah shook his head dubiously. "It's too damn easy," he protested. "I'm still thinkin' Storme's expecting us and has got hisself ready for us."

Conroy squinted one eye thoughtfully. "Maybe so," he admitted. "Reckon I'll go in alone, like Jake said to do. That way I'll find out how many's in the shack."

"It wouldn't work," Preacher Pitt argued calmly. "They'd only hold you as hostage and we'd have one less gun."

Limpy Yule had a theory and one of the Flying H hands ventured a plan, too. Both were debated and discarded. Then Tip spoke up. With Harriet just beyond he was itching for action again and his impatience tinged his tone.

"I'm crawlin' up to that shack," he announced. "I'll either find out who's in it —or tip the trap. I'm—"

"You're under arrest!" a voice barked.

Tip twisted to face a man who had stalked so silently as to be among them unchallenged. Tip was looking into the steely eyes of Sheriff Sherm Markham over the lawman's leveled gun.

"I've been on your heels since you left town," the lawman snapped. "You mentioned the Flying H. A kid cowhand there told me where you'd be. I'm taking you and that bunch of jail-breakers back with me!"

"I'm wondering," Preacher Pitt grinned. One of the Burrs, as silent as the cloaking shadows, had moved. A gun prodded the lawman's spine.

Markham's gray brows arched in surprise. Shrugging, he dropped his gun back into leather and his eyes singled out Walt Conroy.

"I don't know how come you're mixed up with this bunch, Walt," he said, "but I reckon you've had the wool pulled over your eyes. This is Long Tom Langley's crew. I'm deputizin' you and your men right now, asking you to side me against 'em."

The Flying H oldster looked from face to face in stunned amazement, found his tongue. "They's a lot of things that need explainin', Sherm," he conceded. "Some of 'em can wait. If yuh stopped at my place Button likely told yuh what's goin' on. Jake Storme's holdin' my gal in yon shack. These men offered to help me and I can use their guns—and yores, too, Sheriff—to fight the X. That's the important thing right now."

"I told you how I stood," Markham said, icy-voiced. "Jake Storme's busted the law. I'll help you bust him. But I ain't fighting 'long side of this pack. Help me hog-tie the bunch and we'll let 'em set while we tackle the X."

TIP, listening, knew a grudging admiration. He had disliked Sherm Markham because the man put the law above all else. But Markham had brought in Langley's bunch single-handed and taken the trail alone after the jail delivery. Now he proposed to dictate terms with a gun at his back. The man might be heartless but he had guts. And he had maneuvered Walt Conroy into an awkward position.

But the oldster's heart was in that shack beyond the bluff. 'My gal's what I'm thinkin' about," he said stubbornly. We need these gents' guns to get her. I ain't turnin' down that help—and I can't turn ag'in 'em afterwards."

"Then," said Sherm Markham, "I'll have to arrest you for aidin' and abettin' 'em, Walt!"

The coldness of his tone froze Walt Conroy. Tip could see the oldster's face, chalky in the moonlight. Conroy took a step toward the sheriff.

"Take the gun out of his back," Conroy ordered quietly and Burr's arms sagged. The oldster studied the lawman silently.

"Sherm," he said at last, "time was when yuh and I was saddlemates and thought a heap o' each other. We've gone different ways since but I figgered we was friends. Yuh're the best damn lawman this side o' the river but yuh're too good a lawman. Yuh've changed from a swell gent to a law-machine that don't care what it grinds—"

The oldster paused for breath and the eyes of Sherm Markham softened. "That's neither here nor there, Walt," he pointed.

"Like hell!" Conroy shouted. "It's a black night when an old pard talks about arrestin' a friend 'cause the friend happens to be thinkin' about his own flesh and blood. I know what yuh've suffered, Sherm, and it's made me overlook a lot of things. I know what's been eatin' at yore heart for a dozen years and better—but I'm thinkin' it's ate yore heart plumb away—"

"Walt!" Markham begged.

"Yuh ain't a human being," Conroy went on relentlessly. "Yuh ain't been a human bein' since the day yore kid tumbled from the wagon when we was headin' intuh this section. I reckon it's been hell for yuh, wonderin' if Indians got him or what, never knowing if he lived or died.

I can savvy how it killed somethin' in yuh but I can't savvy why yore heart ain't with me tonight—"

Tip was no longer listening. A dozen years or better . . . . a wagon . . . . a boy . . . . Sherm Markham. It all fit—fit too well. It was proof enough and with its acceptance Tip Langley's world crumbled beneath him.

A few hours before he had seriously wondered, for the first time, who his parents might be. He had wanted a name to offer Harriet. Since then he had tossed away all chance of ever winning the girl. But the astounding truth was no less keen-edged for that fact. Sherm Markham, the man who had come to arrest him, the man who would forever cling relentlessly to his trail, was his father.

Then Preacher Pitt was at his side, gripping his arm, steadying him. "I know, Tip," the outlaw whispered. "Long Tom told me—years ago—and I'm guessin' he told you that last night. But it'll turn out, boy. We'll never turn our guns ag'in him. I promise it. We—"

Pitt's words ended in a choking gasp and Tip Langley woke from his shock-induced lethargy to realize that a gun had spoken and Pitt was slumped in his arms, a bullet in his chest.

The belligerent, unmistakable voice of Jake Storme filled the night. "The sheriff's here boys," he bellowed. "It's our chance for a complete wipe-out. Give it to 'em!"

His cry was a cue for guns—a score of them at least—to slash the darkness; a deadly fire-spitting ring that had circled the Flying H and its allies to blast them down!

CHAPTER FIVE

Glory—Bought With Gunflame!

TIP, lowering Preacher Pitt's limp body to the ground, dropped prone, triggering with the motion. The trap was sprung! While they had bickered with the sheriff, the X-in-a-Hat had surprised them. But with gun-work to be done, there was no time for speculation or regrets.

Walt Conroy hunkered near Tip. The youngster heard him curse between shots. "Twenty of 'em!" Conroy muttered. "An' we figgered on buckin' a dozen! Looks like we got ourselves in a tight."

And a tight it was. The moon revealed shifting shadow-shapes that were targets but the light also exposed the Flying H. Nature gave odds to neither side but numbers put the X in ascendancy. Gun flame answered gun flame but the X had the advantage.

Sheriff Sherm Markham was in the thick of it. Tip saw the man down on one knee, pumping lead into the darkness with cool efficiency. His father! Sherm Markham might not measure up to Long Tom Langley in many ways but the lawman wasn't short on courage. Though they would all die here this night, Tip knew something akin to pride as he watched Sherm Markham wage war.

Jake Storme's shouted reference to the sheriff was all too plain. Truly, Storme's ideas had grown too big for his head and his goal was obvious now—domination of the entire range. That was why Storme was jubilant at finding the sheriff in his trap. Sherm Markham, implacable as the law he represented, was a stumbling block for men like Storme. But tomorrow there would be a new lawman, a crooked lawman, put into office by the power of Jake Storme.

Once, when gunfire lulled, Markham crept close to Conroy and Tip, gestured into the darkness.

"This can't last," the lawman observed. "Somebody's gotta break through their line and get to Devil's Butte for help. I'm makin' that try."

A man bulked in the night. Tip, peering, recognized the Marias Kid.

"I heard you, Sheriff," the Kid said. "You're a fancy gun-hand, which I'm not —but one of my grandpaws was a Blackfeet chief. I'm thinkin' I can do a better job than most of cat-footin' through them trigger-twisters."

Sherm Markham spiked the young owlhooter with his eyes. "How do I know you'd come back?" he asked bluntly.

The Kid shrugged. "Nobody dragged me to this party," he remarked. "Reckon if I die tryin' to leave, that's my business." Then he snaked into the darkness.

And Tip, knowing that a brave man had spoken, swore regretfully. The oath became an epithet for the Marias Kid. The guns were chanting again and a low cry speared from the darkness as a body thudded to earth. The Marias Kid lay still.

Tip eyed Sherm Markham. "Reckon that's out," the boy said.

The sheriff grunted, lifted his gun again. He had discarded the notion of piercing the line and Tip didn't blame him for his decision. The Marias Kid had proved that suicide lay in that direction.

The hours marched, tolled off by screaming slugs and the curses of wounded men. The moon dissolved to nothing and the darkness before dawn was a black pall that left only gun-flashes for targets. Tip, fighting grimly, had no idea how the odds now stood.

Once he risked a match. In the seconds before it drew a bullet, he had a glimpse of the Burr twins. They lay side by side, guns tight-clenched, sending bullet after bullet into the night. Both were wounded and bleeding profusely.

It lashed Tip to fury, that sight. First Preacher Pitt, then the Marias Kid—and now the Burrs. He wondered if Limpy Yule was hurt and prayed that at least that valiant little oldster had been spared. Then Walt Conroy was at his elbow again.

"This ain't no fight—it's a massacre," he hissed. "But I'm wishin' somebody could git to that shack, son. I'd a mind to try it 'fore I got a slug in my leg. I'd ruther—we could have Harriet here—when the finish comes."

Tip nodded. He had been toying with the notion of making a try for the shack and he had a hunch Conroy would still attempt it if he didn't. The Marias Kid had proved that the safest place was where they were but anything was worth a try now. Death, in any event, would be the ultimate end.

GRIPPING Conroy's hand reassuringly, Tip eased away toward the end of the bluff. Only instinct guided him but once he had skirted the bluff he was amazed to see that a light still burned in the shack. Between himself and the structure was a pool of blackness that was its own cloaking protection even though it might be alive with hidden gunmen bent on murder.

Hugging rocks, creeping inch by inch, from bush to bush he crossed the area unscathed. It seemed endless hours before he was groping around the shack, seeking the door. Then he found it. Inside a man was talking, his voice low and taunting—Jake Storme!

"My boys'll finish up here," he was saying. "You and me are gonna be leaving."

Tip flung the door open, stepped inside, slammed it shut behind him. Harriet was there, bound and gagged, and Jake Storme had thrown her slight form across one bulky shoulder.

The man spun, his eyes widening with incredulity as he sighted Tip. Then Storme was grabbing for a gun. Tip's own was in his hand but he held his fire. Storme, turning, had placed the girl between himself and Tip.

Storme's gun spat. Tip felt the bullet drill his left shoulder but he was scarcely conscious of the pain. Weaving and dodg-

ing he prayed for an opening as Storme continued to spray lead his way.

And, feeling the bite of it, Tip Langley plumbed the depths of bitterness. He had accomplished the impossible. He had reached this death-ringed shack and, by the same token, he could hope to carry the girl from it. But now, with success within his grasp, it was torn from him because Harriet's danger sealed his gun.

He had to rush Storme! But how could he do it when his wounds had weakened him and every moment was a torture? He took three tottering steps forward, fighting nausea as he went. Then, as in a dream, he heard the door bang open and the wild rebel yell of Limpy Yule was in his ear.

"It's a clean-up, Tip," the outlaw shouted. "The X is on the run!"

Tip heard—and Jake Storme heard. Cursing, the range-hog dumped the girl to the floor, lunged toward the door, firing as he came. It was Tip's moment and he mustered the strength to use it. His gun bucked and the bigness of Jake Storme dwindled before him. But Limpy Yule was falling at the same time. The last Tip remembered was the little outlaw's voice:

"Snuck off when the fracas started, Tip, figgerin' we was outnumbered," he was saying. "Got tuh town and had to shoot out half the windows to arouse anybody. The whole damn town chased me out here and they're cleanin' them X rannies right now!"

* * *

The sun peeped beneath drawn shades. Tip Langley, opening his eyes, realized with vague wonder that he was in a bed—and in the Flying H ranchhouse.

"He's conscious," someone whispered and Tip saw Walt Conroy standing near the bed, flanked by Harriet and Sheriff Sherm Markham.

"The fight—?" Tip muttered weakly. "What happened?"

"A clean-up," Markham said softly. "But all of us packed lead out of it. Walt, here, lost a rider, and—and all of your friends were bad hit too. I've given them a month to clear out and stay out. That was five days ago."

"Five days!" A flood of memory choked Tip. "Then the others are safely away. I'm the only one left to be jailed."

Sherm Markham shook his massive head, squatted beside him. "Limpy Yule told me enough to swear that you never actually worked with the bunch. He cleared you—"

"But—I let 'em all out of jail," Tip said weakly.

SHERM MARKHAM wagged his head again. "Do you think I'd jail you for that?" he asked. "Why, man, I'd be fillin' a grave someplace if it hadn't been for those boys. And when I think of what might have happened if Langley's bunch hadn't sided the H that night! You busted the law, sure, but the law ain't that important to me. It might 'a' been once—"

"But—" Tip began feebly.

"I learned something the other night, Tip," Markham said soberly. "Walt give me the first part of my lesson when he told me what a soulless devil I'd become—and he was dead right. Preacher Pitt and those others opened my eyes, too. When I saw 'em fighting and getting shot for a thing called friendship—

"It changed me, and you finished the chore. You see, Tip, you did a lot of talking with the fever. You spoke of some things that made sense to me. You was my only excuse for being the gent I was. Losin' you, and your mother a year afterwards, took all the heart out of me. That's why I give the law more'n it was worth. It was my way of forgetting."

His hand closed on Tip's. "You've got to hurry and get on your feet, son. We've a lot of lost time to make up—"

Then he was gone, tiptoeing from the room, and Walt Conroy went with him. Tip, his head whirling, found himself alone with Harriet.

"I talked in my fever," Tip said in vast wonder. "I told him who I was."

"Yes," she confirmed and slipped close to him. "You talked, Tip. You talked about a lot of things that were locked up in you—"

He saw color brighten her cheeks and understanding burst upon him. And when he drew her to him he knew she had wanted to hear the things he'd said. They had made sense.

"You brought peace to Devil's Butte, Tip; you and your friends," she murmured. "It means that dreams can come true—for you and I."

Peace—in place of peril—An old trail grown dim and a new one bright in the distance. But sometimes, perhaps, the night breeze would bring the echoing hoofbeats of Long Tom Langley's bunch, riding again. The call of those brave horsemen would be strong in the ears of Tip Langley. He would need a strength to sustain him then, but the light in Harriet's eyes promised that her strength would be welded to his. It would bind him to his new life—keep him on the straight trail—forever.

THE END

SATAN GUIDES THE

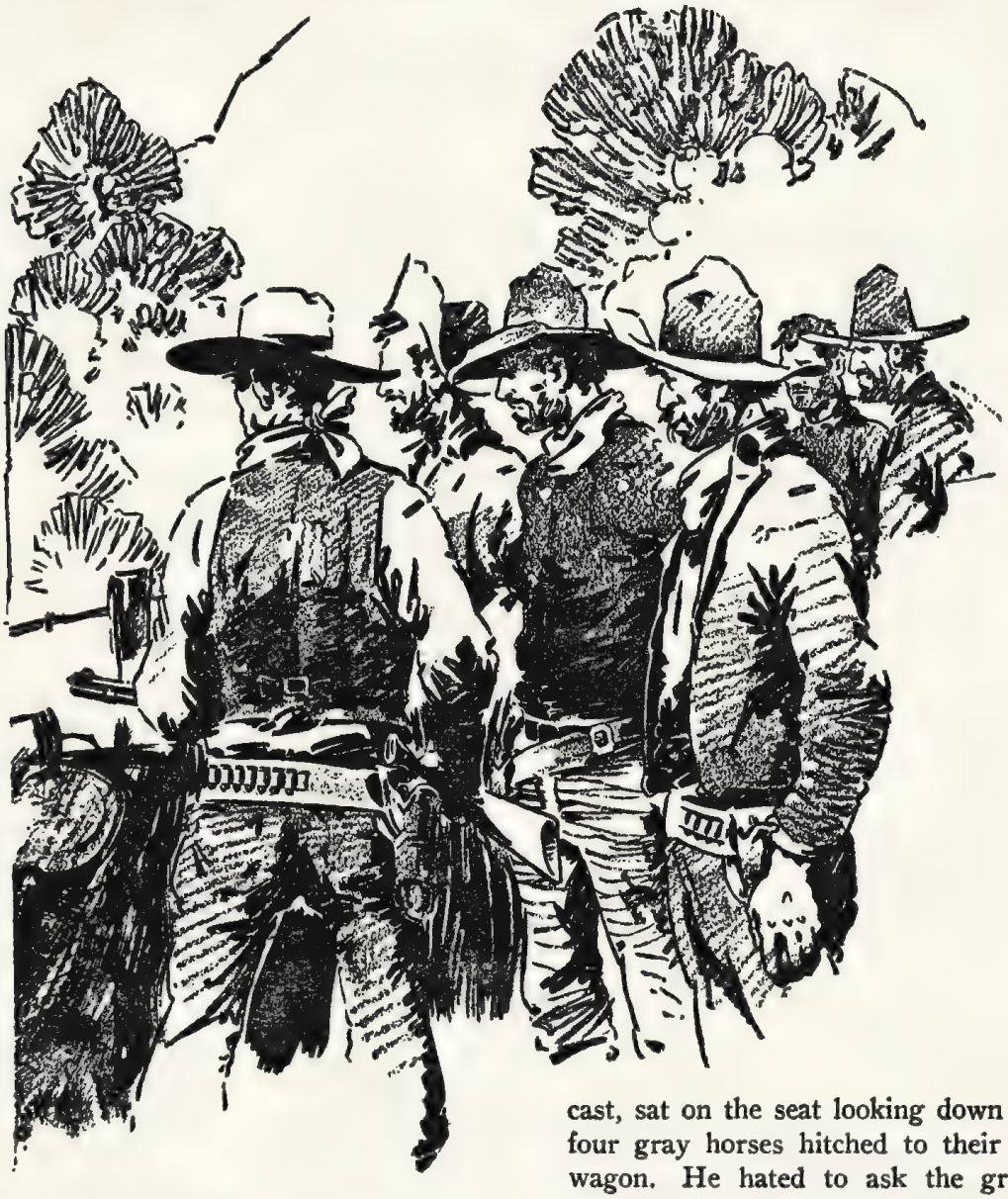
"We'll give you jaspers half an hour to pack up and move out!"

Thrilling gold-rush novelette

By RAY NAFZIGER

It was like the Haylock brothers, stampeding for the raw Trinturas gold-fields, to adopt every hard-pressed, out-of-luck prospector family who needed help. . . . Never thinking that by thus throwing their bread upon the waters, it would come back buttered—in the gun-flame of renegade gold-stampeders!

WAGON TRAINS • •



CHAPTER ONE

Wagons West

A PREMONITION of trouble came to Grant Haylock as he saw the adobe walls of old Fort Kell on the rim of the canyon. The dark walls of the abandoned army post seemed to frown down upon Grant and his younger brother, Homer, as they rested their horses for the steepest grade of the long climb.

Homer, his broken leg bandaged in a cast, sat on the seat looking down at the four gray horses hitched to their heavy wagon. He hated to ask the grays to make that final heart-breaking pull. He doubted if they could make it, although the brothers had thrown away every unnecessary pound to lighten the load, and a rope ran from Grant's chestnut sorrel cowhorse to the wagon.

Thin as fence rails, weak from work, hunger and thirst, the grays were shadowy ghosts of the finest horses that had ever rolled a wagon into the Territory. They'd been gaunted down enough when they reached Hager Ford; the road since then had been unadulterated hell.

Homer was talking to the grays as if they could understand him. "Those liars at Hager Ford," he said, "told us there was plenty of grass all the way to Fort Kell, when there's been only creosote brush. They said there was plenty of water, but it's been full of alkali. If I ever get my hands on their lyin' throats, I'll choke 'em to death. But just up ahead is the Fort; you'll get plenty feed and good water. We'll rest there a few days and fill your bellies three times a day."

Grant Haylock grinned. "Kiss 'em and let's go on," he hoorawed his brother. "C'mon, you gray scarecrows! We got to hurry if we ever want to cash in on the Trinturas strike. When we make our pile, we'll buy you plush-lined collars and stick gold nuggets on your hames. *Eeeah!*"

With a loud clatter of hoofs on rocks, the wagon wheels rumbled upward a few feet and halted. But the grays strained as if to jerk the shoes from their hoofs; they squatted low, pulling out their hearts, fighting with every sinew in their weakened bodies, to inch the heavy wagon toward the summit. And then in one final effort they were standing on the rim, droop-headed, sides heaving, legs trembling.

"Ever see better horses?" asked Homer with pride.

"Not in harness," admitted Grant. As a cowpuncher, when Grant thought of a horse it was as something to ride, not to work.

When the team had rested, Homer drove on toward the big adobe-walled stockade of the fort. With water there and feed, Homer was figuring that Fort Kell was the nearest thing to Paradise this side of the real thing. But Grant, riding his chestnut sorrel through the big gate, still had a feeling that trouble was ahead.

Within the walls was an immense yard, enclosed on three sides by the old adobe soldiers' barracks, chiefly roofless. Along one side lay a huge pole corral, holding over a hundred head of horses; on the opposite side another enclosure held a smaller number of work oxen. A score of big empty trail wagons were crowded into a corner. The back rooms were still in fair repair and housed a saloon, a gambling place and sleeping and eating quarters.

In the middle of the big yard was a well where a droop-eared old mule, hitched to a rope that ran over a pulley, was hauling to the surface a huge bucket, which emptied a stream of water gushing into an earth tank. Homer headed his team for the tank, but the thirst-maddened grays needed no guiding rein. Grant, riding ahead of the outfit, swung down from his saddle.

A ROUND keg of a man with scraggly red whiskers came from the saloon and moved between the tank and the team, holding up his hand as signal to halt. "You boys made it, eh?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Grant. "In spite of the lying buzzards that talked us into takin' this damn route. Nothing but alkali water and little of that. Not enough grass to feed a team o' goats."

The red-whiskered man looked over the grays one by one as Grant unhooked them. "It's five dollars a head to water a horse," he remarked flatly. "Or you can buy it—a—dollar a gallon."

Grant sputtered his astonishment. "That's a holdup!" he said when he recovered his tongue. "Why don't you use a gun, fella?"

"We can do that too if we're put to it," returned the man, still in the same expressionless voice.

"But those hombres at Hager Ford said there was plenty water for us at Fort Kell —*free* water!"

"They told yuh wrong. It takes feed for that mule that draws up that bucket. It took money to dig that well. Them's the prices Sam Clyde charges—cash in

advance. Take it or leave it. It's forty miles 'cross the desert to the next water."

"Listen here," said Grant heatedly. "I am not a greenhorn like you. This Sam Clyde ain't even got the right to occupy this fort. The buildings are still government property. It didn't cost Clyde a cent to dig the well; the government did that. We're not payin' twenty-five dollars to water five horses."

"Oh, pay it and get it over with," urged Homer, hating to see the suffering of the grays prolonged. "Argue about it later."

Grant, muttering to himself, counted out gold pieces. The grays and his saddle horse drank with hasty swallows, sinking their noses deep into the water.

A replica of the keg-bodied red-whiskered man, plainly an older brother, emerged from the saloon and strode over. "Want some corn, too, boys?" he asked.

"We want it, if it ain't as high as the water," growled Grant.

"Only four-bits a pound; thirty dollars a bushel," said the man. "How much yuh want?"

"Goddlemighty!" burst out Homer. "This ain't Alaska, feller!"

Grant Haylock was speechless with rage. He was thinking not only of himself and Homer, but of the Hester family they had left at the foot of the long hill, their oxen too feeble to even attempt the climb. He knew all their money had been taken by the illness and burial of John Hester, a hundred miles back, leaving the ailing mother, the eighteen-year-old daughter, Aldis, and four younger children, all in the care of a worthless relative, Heck Fassett.

"Tell you what," said the older of the red-headed brothers. "Your horses are gaunted down where they can't travel on for a long time, even with feed. You're in a rush to reach the gold fields. We'll trade yuh a light wagon and a couple fat grain-fed horses. See that dun team hangin' their heads over the corral rail? We'll trade 'em, even up, for your four."

"Those two crowbaits for our grays!" Grant exclaimed. "They're eighteen years old, and puffed up on horse trade dope to boot! Hell, man, they couldn't pull the hat off your head!"

From the saloon strolled a thin-faced, beak-nosed man, at least three inches over six feet, with shoulders that would fill a doorway.

"Here's the boss," said one of the brothers, "Sam Clyde. Maybe you can make some deal with him. Sam," he called, "come talk to these jaspers."

"All right, Dolven. Hello, boys," said Sam Clyde with a geniality that did not go with the knife-thin line of his mouth and the colorless eyes. "Headin' for the Trinturas, I take it?"

"They think the feed's too high, Sam," put in the older of the red-bearded Dolven brothers. The younger had left to greet another arriving outfit, a rickety wagon pulled by two almost dead mules, driven by a man who walked alongside the team, with four boys of various ages trudging alongside him. "I offered 'em them two duns for their outfit."

"Fair enough, Lafe," said Clyde eyeing the gray horses admiringly. "But we'll do better than that—give 'em the pick of any two horses in that corral. Two's all you'll need, anyhow."

GRANT'S anger rose to a red-hot heat. He could realize now the whole rotten scheme of this Fort Kell gang. The two men at Hager Ford, had persuaded gold-seekers to take the Kell trail, knowing their teams would reach the fort exhausted from hunger and thirst, and that their drivers would be at the mercy of Sam Clyde. If the drivers had money, they were charged extortionate prices for water and feed; if they were broke, an offer was made them to exchange old horses for their high-grade but exhausted stock.

"We're doin' no trading," declared Grant. "We're going on, and be damned to your crook outfit, Clyde! We could have taken the other trail by Big Muddy where there was plenty water and grass, but your lyin' pair of advance men at Hager Ford persuaded us to take this one."

Clyde's colorless eyes began to glint a little but the tall man held his temper in check. Trouble with this young cowboy would likely prove trouble. "Do as you like," said Clyde. "But there's the desert ahead, and I hate to think of the bones of them four grays bein' picked by coyotes."

"We'll buy a barrel of water," said Grant, finally.

Lafe Dolven motioned to a couple of roustabouts who began filling one of the water barrels fastened to the side of the wagon.

While Grant was paying for it, he heard the angry snarl of controversy raised by the outfit that had just arrived, the man with four young sons, whom the Haylocks had passed on the trail. They had loaned the man some beans and flour, and learned that his name was McQuaid; he was a good sort.

He was protesting now to the younger Dolven that he had no money to buy water for his team; no money to buy even a gallon of water to quench the throats of his four boys.

Dolven did not offer to trade for McQuaid's outfit. The wagon was fit only for firewood, and the mules so old and so small that a team of burros would have been better.

The older Dolven, Lafe, finally went over and ordered McQuaid out of the yard, telling him to be on his way.

Instead, the man, roused to desperation, headed his mules toward the earth tank of water. Snarling, Lafe Dolven shouted and pulled a gun, leveling it on the driver. Grant flung himself forward, but he was too late.

The sixgun crashed, and McQuaid tumbled from the wagon and lit in the dust on his hands and knees. Then with his face screwed up with a terrible intensity, he tried to struggle to his feet.

Grant caught him and eased him to the ground. A bloody froth came to the man's lips and the thin body suddenly collapsed in Grant's arms. "My boys—look after 'em, will you, cowboy?" McQuaid muttered. "They're jist kids—an'—an' all alone."

"I'll look after 'em, pardner," promised Grant. "Take it easy! You'll pull through." But the man shook his head slowly, until after one convulsive shudder, he lay suddenly still. Grant looked up to see the four boys staring down at their father, too shocked and stunned just then for tears.

SAM CLYDE gave a yell, and at once men came running out of the saloon and from the corrals and sheds, all of them plainly belonging to Clyde's outfit. Clyde himself strolled over and looked down indifferently on the dead man.

"Pulled a gun on you, did he, Lafe?" he asked Dolven. "Guess there wasn't nothin' to do but shoot."

"Dad didn't pull a gun!" shouted the oldest McQuaid youngster. "He didn't have no gun. He traded it off at Hager Ford for some flour."

"Look here, younker," growled Lafe Dolven as he turned on the boy, "shut your trap, or you'll git the same medicine."

"He don't have to shut it," put in Grant Haylock coldly. "I saw that deal—it was cold-blooded murder!"

Half a dozen men, their faces threatening, and their hands close to their guns, crowded in on him.

Grant, his hand on his own six-shooter butt, faced them.

Homer, using one crutch, raised in the wagon and stood erect. In his hands he

held a double-barreled shotgun. "Get away from him, all of you!" Homer ordered. "Grant, calm down. You can't do nothin' about this. You'll do yourself no good, nor the boys."

"Sure," said Clyde. "You birds go on to the gold fields and forget this. Lafe Dolven, here, was a little hasty and he's sorry for it. It's best forgotten. We'll take up a collection for the boys."

Grant realized that his brother was right. The men were dispersing; the trouble over.

"I promised McQuaid to look after those younkers," he told Homer as he went to the side of the wagon.

"All right, we'll look after 'em. Have 'em put their bed rolls in our wagon," said Homer promptly. "Their outfit's not worth takin' along." He was silent a moment, then: "It looks as if we were playing step-father to all the people on the trail. You're already looking after the Hester outfit; promisin' to go back and bring 'em feed and water so they could make the hill. All the gold in the Trinturas will be dug up and minted long before we get there!"

"Can't be helped," said Grant. "We're in no shape ourselves to go on. Better buy a couple bushels of corn."

They buried the father of the four boys, Wallace McQuaid, in the old cemetery of the fort. Some of Clyde's men volunteered to help dig the hole, but that offer, and the one to take up a collection for the boys were rejected, for the boys wanted neither help nor money from the gang that had killed their father.

Grant and the older McQuaid boy, Ewen, hammered a rough coffin out of the old boards of the rickety wagon and placed McQuaid in it. The sun went down on the pile of clods that had been heaped up over the grave.

"We've got to go back down the hill to the Hesters," said Grant. "After that we'll decide what to do, but I think we're staying in this country until our stock gets in shape to travel."

Homer sighed. "I figured to find me enough gold to buy a big black-land farm; you aimed to find enough to get a big ranch. But with a widow and her family and these four boys, it looks as if we'd have to start us a orphan asylum. At that, they're all good stock," he went on, with an approving look at the four sad-eyed McQuaid youngsters. "And that eighteen-year-old Aldis Hester you've been sweet on, she's almost worth missin' out on a gold strike to get."

In the dusk with the four boys and their bed rolls and few clothes on their wagon, they drove back down the hill.

It was pitch dark when they reached the Hester camp, at the foot of the hill and close to the sandy bed of a dry river that snaked back toward a distant range of mountains to the north. The only man in the Hester party, the shirt-tail relative whom they called Uncle Heck, was a rattle-brained oldster who had persuaded John Hester to start with his family on the trek to the Trinturas gold fields.

It was a downcast camp. The tragedy of the four boys oppressed the others, although their own situation was bad enough in itself. With little money, with horses and oxen barely able to travel, and in a country without feed and water, there was not much to be cheerful about.

THE barrel of water they rationed out to the two yokes of Hester oxen and the grays. All the animals had a good feed of grain, and Aldis Hester and her sisters and brothers had been busy gathering leaves from trees for makeshift hay.

Grant, Homer, Uncle Heck Fassett, and the girl, Aldis Hester, golden-haired, lithe and courageous, held a conference that night after the youngsters were asleep.

"As I see it," said Grant, "we've got no chance to make it across the desert to

Signal Peak until our stock is in better shape. We've got to get to feed and water."

"Where?" asked Aldis Hester.

"The mountains to the north. They look bare from here, like all mountains look from a distance, but there'll be water and plenty of grass and browse. I noticed a wagon road this afternoon going north up this dry river bed. Heavy wagons have been over it and I saw a few grains of spilled corn. That means grain is being grown somewhere close."

"We got no time to lose," said Heck Fassett querulously. "If we don't get to them gold fields right away, all the good claims will be took up."

"How you going to get there—walk?" asked Grant. "There's nothing to do but lay over and rest up. What do you say, Aldis?"

"You're right of course," said the girl, "We'll do whatever you think best. You were good to help us, and it was fine of you to take over the responsibility for those boys."

"Wasn't anything else we could do," said Grant hastily. "And whether we strike gold or not, Homer is going to start farming somewhere and he can use a couple of those youngsters. And I could start the other two off at ranching, which is what I'm going to do, gold or no gold. Your mother needs rest anyway. And besides," he added grimly, "there's something else that makes me want to stay in this locality a little while. Three things—Sam Clyde and the Dolven brothers.

CHAPTER TWO

Gold-Hunters' Haven

THEY started north the next morning over the road along the dry river channel. The grades and the trail were easy to travel. The first day, Grant, whose cowpunching experience in dry country had taught him to smell out water, dug a well in the river channel to supply the stock and camp with water and fill the barrels lashed alongside the wagons.

On the second day they met a wagon loaded with corn, driven by a pock-marked Mexican.

"Just what we need," said Grant, and he engaged the driver in talk, speaking Spanish. "We can use a load of corn," he told the man. "How much is that worth?"

"Clyde pays us a dollar a bushel at Fort Kell," replied the man.

"And sells it for thirty, the skunk," said Grant. "We'll buy it for a dollar a bushel."

The Mexican looked doubtful. "But this is for Señor Clyde. It would make him mad if he knew I sold it to anyone else."

"How's he going to find out?" asked Grant. "Why take the extra time to drive to the fort? Where are you from?"

"La Mesa," said the man, and waved back toward the mountains, "on the Rio Chiquito. We raise lots of corn." The man's objections to the sale faded before Grant's arguments and he turned his wagon to travel with them.

With the corn and the coarse grass which grew along the banks of the dry river, the horses and oxen were able to crawl a few miles a day. Along the sandy bed there began to appear occasional pools of water. The river ran underground for most of its length, but near the mountains it became a small surface stream.

They turned off it at last, following a little creek, the Rio Chiquito, and came to the settlement of La Mesa.

"As long as you're huntin' feed," grumbled Heck Fassett, "why not keep on goin' till we reach the North Pole? I tell you there won't be no gold left by the time we git to them Trinturas!"

No one paid any attention to Uncle Heck's complaints. They drove into the settlement, consisting of a few houses and a little church, about a small plaza. Homer was looking over the fields below where a few men were at work getting ready for spring plowing.

"With a dam above and a reservoir," his brother remarked to Grant, "there'd be enough water to farm a lot of land here. And I wouldn't mind owning some of it."

"We came out here to hunt gold, not farm land," Grant reminded him.

"Gold can't buy anything I can't get here," argued Homer, who, to Grant's mind was hopelessly interested in farming. "Gold's where you find it!"

There were two main families in the community, they found, the Bacas and Perezes. They had little enough return for their hard work, but they were happy nevertheless, and to the weary travelers they gave a warm welcome.

Aldis Hester's mother was given a comfortable bed and room in the house of old Antonio Perez, head of the village. The horses and oxen were grazed under the watchful eyes of the McQuaid boys, who looked on Grant with a hero worship that embarrassed him. Aldis Hester teased Grant about his adopted family, but Grant knew that the fact that she teased him was a good sign that the girl cared for him.

A day later a visitor to the Perez family brought the news that the rich gold fields of the Trinturas had been extended; other finds were being made. It would be as big as the California strike of '49, some people predicted. That meant more wagons and people coming over the Fort Kell trail would reach the old fort and be at the mercy of Clyde and the Dolvens and their crew of cut-throats.

Hearing the news, Uncle Heck Fassett's gold fever climbed so high that he began panning for gold in the washes that came down out of the mountains. Nights he badgered the group to move on, but Grant shook his head. The two spans of big grays and the Hester oxen were gaunted down to where it would take weeks for them to get strength enough to finish the long trek that still remained. But as it developed, they were not even to have a week.

ANTONIO PEREZ, the head of the village, came to the Haylocks several days after their arrival as they were repairing a wagon. "It is not wise for you to stay here," he said apologetically. "One of the Dolven brothers, Gid, rode in last night and was surprised to find that you people had come here. He told me not to let you stay here."

"But we aren't able to go on," Grant argued. "Mrs. Hester is not well enough to make a long trip, and our horses and oxen need several weeks of rest."

Perez looked sympathetic. "I am sorry," he said. "I dare not go against Sam Clyde and Lafe and Gid Dolven. We must live in peace with them, or their men will run off our horses, and perhaps burn our houses. They will blame us if you do not leave, and we cannot afford to anger them. All of them are bad men —murderers, rustlers and thieves. Dolven wanted us to steal your horses and oxen."

"If you want to fight Clyde," offered Grant, "we'll help you."

The old man shook his head sorrowfully. "There would not be enough of us, señor, to fight Clyde. He has many more men than you saw at the fort. He has men at Hager Ford—all over the country."

Grant knew the terror in which certain of the tough Anglos with their more modern guns and ammunition held isolated little settlements of Spanish-speaking people. Outnumbered, armed only with ancient single-shot weapons, the La Mesa people were no match for the repeating

rifles and six-shooters of the Clyde-Dolven renegades.

"It is better that you leave this country," Perez warned Grant. "Clyde has his eyes on your fine horses; they are easily worth six or eight hundred dollars a pair. And this Sam Clyde is very smart; he always schemes to get more money. Some day he plans to own all of the country about Fort Kell, even to these mountains."

"Someone will have to knock Clyde's horns down," said Grant. "I'd sure like to have a try at it!"

"If you are not yet ready to go on, you could move to another place near here," Perez suggested. "Just below, the Rio Chiquito empties into the Rio Bravo, and if you wish to stay there to farm, there are fields that our people once cultivated and which need only plowing. We could furnish you with seed. Why not settle there, and then some day, perhaps, we will be strong enough to fight Clyde?"

Grant remembered the spot where the river forked; and the roofless walls of old stone houses which were still there. He hitched a pair of grays to the wagon, and he and Homer went down to look over the place more carefully.

Above the river, out of reach of floods, there were fields which could easily be put back into cultivation; good soil which had produced bumper harvests. Homer, stomping about on his crutches, took some of the earth in his fingers and nodded his head approvingly. The vegetation that had grown up on the fields since could be easily cleared and burned.

"I wouldn't care if I never see any gold fields," remarked Homer, "if I had a chance to farm here. This land with the river to irrigate it, is worth more than any gold mine."

Grant laughed. "You blasted farmer, I ought to go on and leave you in this country!" he threatened.

"Not a bad idea," retorted Homer. "With you gone, I might have some chance with Aldis."

"We've got to stay for a while, anyway," said Grant, "until we're in shape to travel. We'll need a place to fort up in against Clyde and the Dolvens. It won't take much work to repair that big house on the bench just above the river.

THE following morning, Grant, Homer, the McQuaid boys and four men from the village came down to lay up stones to rebuild the walls to their former height. These they roofed with old log rafters taken from the abandoned houses, laying brush on top and mudding it over to make a tight roof. About the edge of the roof they laid more stones in the walls to make a defense parapet, loopholed for rifles. For the horses and oven they built up the walls of a solid corral adjoining the house, high enough so the animals would be safe from bullets.

In such a fortress-like house and adjoining corrals, generations of Spanish settlers had lived secure against hostile Indians. There was a shallow well of water in the courtyard of the house; with a supply of feed they could stand a siege.

The house was finished in a few days, and the Hester family was moved into it —the sick mother, Aldis and the smaller children—while the Haylocks, McQuaids and Heck Fassett camped outdoors.

Four times a day one of the community climbed a nearby hill with a battered pair of binoculars to examine the trail to Fort Kell. The Clyde-Dolven gang was a menace that had to be guarded against constantly.

Heck Fassett, impatient with the delay, still occupied his time prospecting the washes and hills, picking up rocks that held no trace of mineral, panning sand from bars where there was not a speck of color.

Homer, on his crutches, puttered about the fields that had once been cultivated,

and helped the older McQuaid boys burn brush. There was no telling; they might be in this country long enough to plant a crop. . . .

While Homer gave time to his farming, Grant rode into the mountains, following the deep canyons up under the high peaks. To his surprise he found cattle scattered about the high ridges, chiefly unbranded stock that had escaped from old Spanish ranches which had formerly been in the country. From talk with old Antonio Perez, he learned that a big land grant, given to a Perez generations before, extended in a long strip below the mountains. This grant, running to the canyon mouths, meant control of the mountains also. The grant could be bought cheaply in yearly payments from the La Mesa heirs. With the grant as nucleus, a ranch of limitless area could be established.

Along a wide canyon one day, Grant found the almost obliterated tracks of an old road, and remembered that old Perez had remarked that once a wagon road had cut through the range to the coast. Following the faint tracks, as they ascended by easy grades to a pass, he found that on the other side the road dropped to a high mesa offering a level trail to distant Signal Peak, the same mountain which the Fort Kell trail passed.

Grant whistled softly. All the road needed was brushing out. There was plenty feed and water along the route, and wagons could easily cut across to it from Hager Ford. Here was a shorter road the gold hunters could take and miss the desert country entirely.

He was too far from the house to return that night, so he camped and headed back the next morning. Riding along the road again, he laughed grimly. This old trail could become a bomb to explode under Clyde and blow his holdup outfit at Kell sky-high.

Grant jogged leisurely along, leaving the canyon to strike for the river. Maybe, he thought, a man was a fool to go chasing a gold will-o'-wisp in the Trinturas country. He and Homer would be rank amateurs at prospecting; Uncle Heck Fassett claimed to be an old sourdough, but he was probably lying. The Hester family and the McQuaid boys had no business in a rough mining district, while here, Homer knew farming and the McQuaids could help him. As for Grant, he knew cattle, and there was a chance here to establish a ranch. This country offered opportunities to them all—to settle, to use what they already knew. If Aldis would marry him, they would not have to wait until he had found gold. With the wild cattle he could trap, he could start a herd.

Haylock's chain of thought was interrupted by a distant booming as he approached the forks. Rifles! He set spurs in his horse.

It sounded like an attack on the stone house at the forks of the Rio Chiquita!

CHAPTER THREE

Run or Die!

WHEN Grant came in sight of the house, he saw that Homer, the older McQuaid boys and Heck Fassett were making a stout defense from the flat roof. The horses and oxen had been penned in the high-walled corral.

The attackers, some fifteen or more men, were split in two parties, one on the brushy slope behind the house, the other below the cut-bank of the river, not far from the front wall of the dwelling. The older Dolven brother, Lafe, was evidently leading this group.

Dismounting, Grant tied his horse out of sight in the brush, and taking his rifle, moved along the ridge above the river. The horses of both Clyde-Dolven groups had been tied down the steep-walled channel, out of bullet range. Near the small

stream of water lay the camp, in it a man was busy cooking over a fire. For a moment Haylock considered trying to stampede the horses and setting the men afoot, but he gave that up in favor of something more drastic.

He halted finally in a position looking directly down on the men in the riverbed below the house. Besides hailing shots at the house, Lafe Dolven had been rigging up a crude piece of machinery in the protection of the steep river bank.

The butt of a long, slim tree trunk had been anchored under boulders, and a few feet along its length, it had been laid over a big boulder and secured. The small end had been pulled down by means of ropes and a makeshift windlass.

Grant figured that the apparatus was a throwing device, similar to the catapults used in ancient days to hurl heavy stones against town walls. This was, he guessed, intended to throw bundles of burning pitch wood. Grant had to smile at that, knowing the dirt roof was not inflammable, but he sobered soon enough as he realized that the men planned to throw the fire balls among the horses and oxen corraled in the stockade corral.

Their hope was that the animals, frightened by the flaming bundles, would break down the stout gate and escape, to be caught later by the rustlers. Since the animals, particularly Homer's four grays, were undoubtedly what the men wanted most, their crude catapult would accomplish the purpose of the attack.

As he watched from behind a brush screen, the catapult sent the first blazing bundle sailing into the air. It landed only ten feet short of the corral. That was too close. The machine, Grant realized at once, was no joke. Steadying his rifle barrel over a boulder, he went into action.

HIS first shot at the men operating the device crippled one and sent the others scuttling for cover. When his rifle crashed again, consternation seized the whole party, and the group hastily scattered down the river bed to get out of range. Grant could have brought down two or three of them as they ran, but it was too much like cold-blooded slaughter.

Reaching cover, the group opened up on him, but Grant had finished with them temporarily and had already returned to his horse.

Jumping into the saddle, he raced up the ridge to cross the river where the brush was thick enough to cloak him and his mount. Riding to a position in back of the group attacking the rear of the house, he again tied the animal, and stalked them on foot. This party, he found, was led by the other Dolven brother, Gid. They had crawled down the slope, fanning out in a semicircle to send shots that chipped fragments from the parapet.

Again from the back of the enemy, Grant opened fire, a warning shot first, and then as they answered, emptying his rifle rapidly. For a few moments there was a hot exchange of bullets. Grant began shooting to kill; this was a bloody war on women and children and his crippled brother. After he had brought down two men, the whole party hunted new positions hastily. As they ran they were exposed to the guns on the roof, and another man fell.

Safely in the brush, the rest began an advance on Grant, and once more he retreated, switching his attack to harass the party in the river channel.

Finding the rifleman at their back had gone, Lafe Dolven had sent a couple of men to hunt him, while the others returned to try to stampede the stock with their fire-throwing contraption. As Grant's gun got into operation, they hunted cover. Knowing the terrain, Grant was more than a match for the pair sent to hunt him, and finally drove them back to their party. Once more Lafe Dolven retreated toward

camp, to be joined by his brother's group.

The brothers had run into more trouble than they had expected in their attack on the little settlement. Their losses already were heavy, and to get the gun-wasp who stung them from the back meant more men being killed. While, if they retreated toward Fort Kell, they would be exposed to the deadly fire of the same rifle.

A white rag waved on the end of a rifle barrel; the Dolvens were asking a parley. Grant, watching, saw Lafe go to the house for a talk. What they wanted, he guessed, was a retreat to Fort Kell without danger of ambush along the road.

Homer appeared on the roof to exchange a few words with Lafe. Then turning to the ridge, Homer signalled to Grant that the battle was all over and indicating by sign talk that the raiding party would return to Fort Kell if they were allowed to go peacefully.

GRANT, still keeping himself hidden, counted the riders as they strung out back toward Fort Kell, two of them tied across their saddles. After that he followed for some distance to see that the retreat was genuine. But the Dolven brothers had had enough; they continued hurriedly toward Fort Kell.

Grant rode up to the house, where the besieged rushed out to give him a boisterous greeting. The battle had been a triumph for them, but they feared it was only a temporary one.

"Dolven said we'd pay for all this," remarked Homer to Grant privately. "Claimed we killed two of their men and crippled three others. Said Sam Clyde would come up here with forty or fifty men, burn us out and kill us all off. Except that they might take Aldis and her older sister back to the fort. Damn him, I should have forgot that truce flag and killed him for that! It's run or die. We're in a tight, Grant."

Grant nodded. They were in a tight, in a remote region where the nearest law was at the territorial capital, too far away to be any help. Old Heck Fassett, he found, had not been in the battle at all; Heck had ridden away that morning on his saddle mule, heading for Hager Ford. The old fellow had acted mysteriously.

"I found another road that we can take out of this country," Grant told his brother and Aldis Hester. "It goes over the mountains, instead of passing Fort Kell. But our stock aren't in shape to try it, and besides I hate to run from those polecats."

"Me, I hate to leave this place, now or any time," said Homer. "No amount of gold could buy land any better. But it's up to Aldis."

"Mother says that she won't endanger our lives by keeping us here any longer," said the girl. "If you think it best to go, we'll get ready to start."

Grant shook his head. "I doubt if your mother could stand the trip. My vote would be stay. We've got enough grub and grain to stand a long siege, and I've got a scheme to get help in beating Clyde. It means my going to Hager Ford. I'll get back before Clyde can collect his army; that will take him a few days. Then we'll see what happens."

Feeding his cowhorse, he left shortly afterwards, cutting across country for Hager Ford, where the two main trails west branched, one swinging far to the south, the other to head through Fort Kell.

He arrived in the afternoon of the next day, finding some twenty wagons on the flats with their thin, gaunt teams—oxen, mules, horses—pasturing on the inadequate grass. At the Ford was a small shack settlement, several saloons, a general store, a blacksmith shop.

The same two men who had told the Haylocks, the McQuaids and the Hesters about the easy trail to Fort Kell, and the

abundance of land and water along it, were circulating about, persuading people to take the Fort Kell road.

AS GRANT rode up, one of the pair, a fat-bodied slug of a man, was explaining to a party of bearded Missourians the advantages of the Fort Kell trail. The Missourians didn't like the southern route because of the danger from Indians, but their leader, a black-bearded giant, remarked that he had heard the prices charged at Fort Kell for feed and water were extortionate.

"Why," Clyde's man returned indignantly, "them is jist lies! You kin ask anybody that's been over that road if they didn't git water free at Kell, and feed cheap. Of course it's nothin' to me which way you take, mister, but the grass between here and Kell is so good yuh wouldn't need to buy no feed. And as for water, whoever heard of chargin' for that out here?"

"Me, I been over it," put in Grant harshly as he swung down from his saddle. "And I'll tell you about that damn road. There's nothin' along it except gyp water, and as for feed, we had four of the best horses that ever drew a wagon, and they were barely able to pull our wagon into Fort Kell. At the fort there was plenty of water—a big dirt tank full of it—at five dollars a head for a horse, or a dollar a gallon. Corn was thirty dollars a bushel. That gang don't want to sell you feed; they'd rather force you to trade your good stock for their worthless teams. I saw a man shot down by those Fort Kell buzzards just because he hadn't money to pay for water, and he tried to take some. And," he said, turning to the Clyde man, "you're the lyin' snake Clyde hires to turn folks along that route!"

Haylock hit the man in the mouth with a hard fist. As the fellow went for his holstered six-shooter, Grant hammered him mercilessly, bloodying his face, drubbing his ribs, finally delivering a smash to the jaw that sent the man to the ground, where he lay still. No one interfered; the partner of the fellow had hurriedly retreated to one of the saloons.

"What would you do in our place, cowboy?" the big Missourian asked. "My name's Bentley, and these are mostly my kinfolks. We're headed for the Trinturas gold fields."

Other men had gathered, attracted by the fight. All of them were also undecided about routes.

"If it was me, this is what I'd do. . . ." said Grant, and he knelt to draw a map in the dirt while men pushed in close.

"The Trinturas gold fields are west and north, past Signal Peak," he told them. "You want to get there the quickest way, and I know a new road that beats the other two. It's got feed and water along it. You strike across the ridge northwest to hit a road along the Rio Bravo, and following that, you'll come to a place we've established just below the forks of the Bravo and Rio Chiquito. You turn up the Chiquito past a Mexican settlement where you can buy corn for your horses at a dollar a bushel. From there you'll find an old road leading up a canyon to a pass over the mountains, where there's a level mesa stretching to Signal Peak."

Three men, a saloonkeeper and his two bartenders, had come over to hear the last of the talk. The saloonman pushed close to look at the map in the dust.

"Say, I'd be slow to listen to that cowboy," the saloonman remarked. "There's no protection in them mountains, and I heard there's a gang operatin' up there. This cowboy might be pullin' a trick to get folks in a country where he could run off their stock. No wagon ever crossed that range; it's all a man on horseback can do to make it. What would a cowboy know about a road anyway?" he demanded.

These men, Grant realized, were also in Clyde's gang, and Grant became watchful.

THE giant, black-bearded Missourian, Bentley, stepped to Grant's side. "This cowboy looks all right to me," he stated bluntly. "And what he tells us, I'm believin'."

There came a sudden wild yell from one of the saloons, then a chorus of shouts. "It's another gold strike!" someone yelled. "Along the Bravo!"

The arguments over routes were immediately put aside and men began running with a loud clump of boots toward the saloon, Grant with the rest.

Inside he found Heck Fassett, already drunk as a hootowl, standing on the bar holding up an old buckskin pouch, and pouring gold dust from it into the palm of his other hand.

"Yessir, got this up on the Rio Bravo. . . ." Heck's thick voice came with a drunken boastfulness. "Why, howdy, Grant," he greeted Grant as the cowboy pushed through the crowd. "I shore struck it rich. Now we won't have to go to them Trinturas fields, an' yuh won't laugh any more at my prospecting. C'mon, boys, likker up; it's on me. Me, I struck gold."

"I don't believe it," Grant told the crowd. "I wouldn't believe that old coot on a stack of Bibles. He's been puttering around, lookin' for gold, but I don't think he ever found any in the Bravo country. It's all been prospected over and no trace of gold found."

"But I found it all right," insisted Heck triumphantly. "Not fur from the forks o' the Bravo and Chiquito. Got the dust to show, ain't I? I'm settin' up the drinks."

"You keep the rest of that dust," ordered Grant sternly. "I got a hunch that's all you'll ever get. The Hesters need that money too bad for you to throw it away on whiskey. And, mister, you've started something, and your life won't be worth much if there's anything faked about this."

"It ain't faked," Heck insisted as men pushed up closer.

"You going to show us where you found that?" they asked Heck.

"Sure I'll show you where I found it," he said. "I'll make you all rich, boys."

"You'll go back home, you drunken fool!" said Grant. "Time to sober up." He pulled Heck from the bar.

"Hold on, cowboy!" bawled a frock-coated gambler. "That old bird's going to take us out to show us where he found that dust. He ain't your property, cowboy; he belongs to all of us. And he'll show us where he got it, or we'll string him up. Likewise we'll string him up if we find he's fooling us."

His tone was ugly; as were the growls that welled up from the other men, including the Missourians. Grant gave up his effort to get Heck away from the crowd. He doubted that Heck had made any strike, but there seemed no other explanation for the poke of gold dust.

Men ran to their horses to harness them and hitch them to the wagons. A few had started to abandon their vehicles, taking what could be packed on a horse, but there was no advantage in speed, since Heck Fassett would be going with the main party.

Already word of the strike on the Rio Bravo had flashed over the little encampment, as it would soon be swiftly flashing over the surrounding country. A big stampede was building.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gunsmoke in Gold!

THEY moved out within an hour, a motley company of wagons and horseback riders leading pack animals, stringing across country under the guidance of

Heck Fassett and the cowboy who had laughed at the story that the old fellow had found gold.

The other men thought that Grant was trying to discourage them into staying behind, and once having seen the poke of dust, there was no holding them back. The sight had been enough to set up the gold-madness in them; an army could not have stopped them now. The gold fever had them.

They traveled until past darkness and camped. Men were assigned to guard Heck and Grant to watch that they did not slip away. As the two lay down in borrowed blankets, Grant punched Heck in the ribs.

"Heck," he asked, "where'd you get that gold?"

But Heck, in his drunken stupor, only grunted. Men had been giving him drinks from their bottles. When they went on in the early morning, he had to be boosted into the saddle of his mule, weaving drunkenly as they traveled.

Reaching the river the second day the first leg of their journey, they watered their horses and let them graze on the young green grass. It was an amicable company; placer gold would be likely scattered for miles along the river bed, and there would be enough good claims for all of the party. Hope ran high in the breasts of the men.

They traveled on all the next day, and camped early, giving their teams time to graze. Again Grant pressed Heck for the location of his find.

"Why should I tell you where I found it?" he said slyly. For, by half promising to reveal the source of the dust, Heck had had chances at more bottles of whiskey, and had made the best of them. "Maybe I won't tell no one. Maybe I forgot the place."

"You got another guess coming on those 'maybes'," said Grant.

"You said it, cowboy," said Bentley, the leader of the Missourians. "That talk of a rope around your neck, old feller, wasn't just talk, if you pretend you forgot the place. We're willing to give you first chance at staking out a claim, but after that, she's open to all of us."

The threat seemed to sober Heck for a while, but on the next day he was drunk again and bawling out the verses of the song of the "Forty-niner" and his "dar'-ter, Clementine."

That afternoon, with drivers hurrying the slow pace of their teams, they reached the house below the forks of the Bravo and Chiquito. The place, Grant saw, with relief had been undisturbed during his absence. The older McQuaid boy was plowing in one of the cleared fields, while Homer and the younger boys were working on the canal which brought water down from the river, taking out a mile or so above the field.

ALDIS HESTER, the sleeves of her dress rolled high, her hair a golden luminous cloud, came from the kitchen to stare in astonishment on the caravan of wagons and riders.

"What is it?" she asked, and Grant, looking at her, knew that his heart belonged irrevocably to the girl.

She was the kind that belonged in country like this—not in the turmoil of a rough mining camp. He knew also, since Heck's alleged discovery of gold, that he didn't want this country disturbed—not at least by the stampede of tinhorns, saloon hangers-on, gunmen and miners who would flock to a big gold camp.

"Heck was in Hager Ford with a poke of gold dust," he answered the girl's question. "Claims he found it near here. On the strength of that, there's a gold rush on. These men are going to make him tell where he found it. They're honest men, but it's liable to go hard with Heck if he has lied to them."

"Heck was always crazy about pros-

pecting," Aldis said, "but there's no real harm in him."

"Nor any real good, either!" grumbled Grant. "The lazy jasper! You've had no sign of trouble from that Fort Kell gang?"

"None," she replied. "But we've been penning the cattle and horses every night and keeping watch."

As they spoke a rider appeared above the ridge on the Fort Kell side of the river and spurred his horse down the slope and across the little stream.

"That's my brother," said Bentley. "I sent him on ahead while I was in the Hager Ford camp to investigate the stories we'd heard about the trail. But how did he know we headed this way?"

The rider came on fast, pushing his tired horse hard and riding up to Bentley.

"Thought I'd find you over here somewhere," he said. "One of the men workin' in a saloon at Hager Ford pounded to Fort Kell yellin' that gold had been found on the Bravo near the Chiquito fork. Clyde, the Dolvens and all their stablemen and gamblers is headed this way—killin' their horses to make it. They're going to drive everybody off their claims and grab the field for themselves."

"We haven't even staked out any claims yet," said Bentley.

"And you'll have to lick Clyde first before you can stake 'em out," said his brother.

Bentley turned inquiringly to Grant.

"That's just the sort of trick that outfit of murderers and thieves would pull," said Grant. "What you going to do—run or fight? There may be no gold," he reminded the Missourian.

"We'll fight," said Bentley curtly. "We'll risk there being no gold. You got a strong-lookin' fort here. We'll join with you."

The group counted almost thirty men, part with families. The families were sent into the house. Since there was not room in the house for all, the men took the picks and spades they were carrying and erected, some forty feet distant from the house and corral, a rampart of earth. They dug a deep trench behind it so the fighters could safely stand erect.

The teams were crowded into the corral with the Haylock horses and Hester oxen. The wagons were lined up against the walls of the house. In two hours of furious labor the building was surrounded by a quadrangle of trenches, earth and rock barricades.

THEY had barely finished when one man who had been stationed on the ridge as lookout, came to report that a long string of horsemen had come in sight. A line of pack mules trailed them. After that, they waited until the leaders of the troop topped the hill and stared down in surprise at the preparations that had been made to receive them. More horsemen pulled up on the ridge, apparently an endless stream of them.

One of the riders, Lafe Dolven, waving an improvised flag of truce, rode across the river and up to the barricade, followed by a few of his men. Lafe's eyes glanced sharply about him.

(Continued on page 139)

Tempting bait for bushwhackers was that fast-riding young Texan on the hell-trail down from Dodge, with a fortune in his pack horses' kiack boxes. . . . And the drygulch wolves were waiting! . . . Don't miss Cliff Farrell's smashing novelette—"Blood Pays for Texas Beef"—in the April *Ace-High!*

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Up The Trail

IT WAS an open secret on the big Fiddleback range, up in Montana, that there were two sure, quick ways to commit suicide. One was to call Uncle Eat-'Em-Up Jack Winters—ornery wheel-chair owner of the Fiddleback—a fighting name, and the other was to try to run sheep on Fiddleback grass. So young Tom Winters, foreman of Uncle Jack's spread, thought he was either having eye-trouble, or that some blunder-headed sheep outfit had made an easily-righted mistake the morning he saw a sheep wagon just ahead.

He rode his horse boldly up to the sheep wagon that constitutes the herder's house on wheels, and was about to dismount, when a curly-headed girl in flannel shirt and overalls appeared in the doorway of the wagon. The carbine in her hands pointed directly at Tom.

"I was expecting visitors before now," she told him. "You're riding a Fiddleback horse. The Fiddleback outfit are a bunch of cold-blooded murderers. Jim Boyd was my dad. I've come to sheep you out."

Tom Winters, grinning at her with frank admiration, dismounted, ignoring the carbine. "Do you still cuss like you did the time I pulled you out of Antelope Creek, when you was about as big as a wagon-wheel, Betty?" he asked. "Jim Boyd thought a lot of this range. Do you think he'd want you to run sheep on it?"

"You're Tom Winters. I remember," she said evenly. "I'm fighting against the men who killed my dad and brothers."

"Jim Boyd," Tom told her, the grin gone from his face, "was killed in a fair fight. And your brothers weren't killed by Fiddleback men."

He had managed to get close enough to grab the carbine. When she fought like a wildcat, some wild impulse made him kiss her.

But Tom didn't see the big red-faced, red-haired rider who had just pulled up. He was unaware of the newcomer's presence until a hard blow on the jaw dropped him on the ground.

"Lick him, Angus!" the girl panted. "Give him the beating of his life."

That was the renewal of an acquaintance which had started ten years before, between Tom and the girl, daughter of the hard-headed cowman, Jim Boyd. But in reality it was far more than that. For that meeting with the tough Angus McKenzie, sheepman, and the Boyd girl was to put a price on the head of young Tom Winters.

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SATAN GUIDES THE WAGON TRAINS

(Continued from page 137)

"We hear there's been a gold strike on up here," he said. "And that a old fellow that's been with the Haylocks made it. We want him. After he takes us to the location and we've staked out our claims, you men can have what's left," he added arrogantly.

A growl came from the throats of the entrenched gold-hunters and they hurled curses at Dolven, at Clyde and all their party.

"All right," snarled Dolven. "If that is the way yuh take a fair offer, we'll jist drive yuh out of this country. We'll give you jaspers half a hour to pack up and move out."

"So you can get us out in the open and jump us," returned Grant Haylock. "Start your fireworks, Dolven. This is a good time to settle with you and your Fort Kell cut-throats for killing McQuaid."

"That's the way you talk now," retorted Dolven. "But your gang of pilgrims and these dirt walls won't hold us five minutes."

Shortly after the Dolven party had returned, the guns opened up. Clyde's men picked points of vantage all about the makeshift fort, and when their rifles got into action the little valley seemed to shake under the thunder.

(Continued on page 140)

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(Continued from page 139)

Grant Haylock, in charge of a picked squad of sharpshooters on the house roof, told them to hold their fire. The shots being flung at the house were merely to feel out the defenders. Clyde would not be fool enough to try a rush in daylight. Night would bring an early moon; the real attack, Grant guessed, would come just before moonrise when it would be darkest.

He noted that the Missourians were cool fighters who wasted few shots. Bentley, who led the men stationed behind the barricades, had seen war service.

As twilight came and darkness deepened, the lights were extinguished in the house where women worked preparing supper as calmly as if they were in a peaceful camp. The besiegers' guns had stopped, and the defenders waited, tense and anxious, knowing a rush was due. Thunder rumbled in the mountains; a storm was coming down from the range. That would help the attackers.

Grant Haylock had persuaded Bentley to place all the men on the roof top; the outer barricade would be too hard to hold in the darkness.

Dolven had seen the embankment and trench, and the attackers would be expecting a strong resistance at the barricade. If the men were withdrawn from it, Haylock argued, the Clyde-Dolven men would be wasting their ammunition on the barrier as they rushed. In addition, in the trench behind the barricade, the defenders placed a tangle of wire and sharpened stakes to delay the rush.

When the last glimmer of light had faded, and the advancing cloud mass had blotted out half of the stars in the sky, the rush started. It came almost in silence, men advancing on the rectangular barricade from all directions. At the moving shadowy lines the guns on the roof bellowed and spat flame, sending down slanted death upon the attackers.

SATAN GUIDES THE WAGON TRAINS

THE attackers started firing as they neared the barricade; then with wild yells the men suddenly flung themselves over the banks of earth, shooting wildly at dim shapes they took to be men. Plunging into the snarl of stakes and wire in the trench bottom, they struggled free and ran for the house. Already they had suffered an appalling loss from the delay; and they suffered further when they reached the house itself.

Like two men fighting with hands locked about each other's throats, the decision hung in the balance. The men under the walls were trying to batter into the house and some were climbing to the roof. Then before the hail of lead from the defenders, the raiders reeled back, and suddenly broke in full flight.

A few of the party tried to maintain a foothold on the opposite side of the barricade, but rifle bullets from the parapet clipped about them, and they also had to retreat. After that, Clyde and the Dolvens were slow to start another general rush, but slugs continued to spat viciously against the adobe walls of the house and roof parapet. At intervals, under cover of the storm clouds rolling down from the mountains, small parties made forays which were flung back. One wagon was set afire but a gust of rain came along to put it out before it could spread.

Panicky from the shots, the animals milled in the corrals. In the house children wailed. Aldis Hester comforted the frightened women, rocked babies and saw that hot coffee and food were ready for men who descended in relays to the kitchen.

Toward morning all but a few guns stopped. Most of the Clyde-Dolven men had returned to their camp between the cut-banks of the river bottom for breakfast. They showed no signs of departure; with Uncle Heck's placer gold field at stake, they'd stay until they were starved or beaten off.

(Continued on page 142)

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5.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
5.50-17	3.35	1.40
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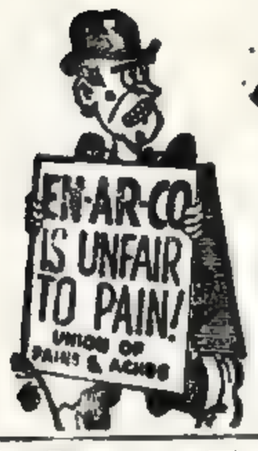

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(Continued from page 141)

The sky had cleared of the storm over the country below the mountains, and light seeped slowly into the valley. The river had risen a little during the night, and to those on the roof came the muted murmur of its waters.

Grant Haylock, looking up the river toward its branch, the Rio Chiquito, suddenly stared hard. Where the Chiquito emptied into the Bravo, the creek channel was wide and shallow, much wider than that of the river which ran past the house within the narrow confines of precipitous banks.

Grant Haylock was not looking at the river, but at the Chiquito, where appeared a high, dirty-gray, moving wall, stretched from bank to bank. At the same moment to his ears came a distant roaring that rapidly became thunderous. That wall he realized suddenly was water from a cloudburst above, destined to pour into the Bravo in a very few seconds.

HE HELD his breath. He could hear faintly the talk of the Clyde-Dolven men below the cut-bank of the river. Some of them who recognized the noise of the advancing water wall would be looking up the Bravo, but of course seeing nothing.

Then the wall of water reached the river, sweeping across the channel. It dashed against the opposite bank, splashing high in the air. Before the weight of the water behind it, the wall swept down the narrow channel of the Bravo.

From the Clyde-Dolven force came wild yells of panic, then a scrambling rush for safety. Cut-bank walls hemmed them in on each side and they could not hope to out-race the water, higher now than in the Chiquito as it was forced within the river's narrow trough.

Those men who were caught by the full force of the flood were tossed high by the wave, and they vanished almost at

once. A few managed to scramble up a rocky island, a brush-covered pinnacle in the middle of the channel. Over the invaders' camp roared a stream fully twenty feet deep.

The men on the roof, watching the disaster, were held paralyzed for an instant; then flinging themselves over the parapet, they headed for the river bank with all speed.

But there was nothing that could be done; there remained only the handful of men who had clambered to the security of the island pinnacle. Gid Dolven was the only one among them that Grant identified.

"It caught Sam Clyde, too?" Grant asked across the narrow channel.

"Yes," said the younger Dolven brother. "And Lafe." Awe was in Gid Dolven's voice; his face was still a strained mask of fear. "Who'd of thought that any damn river would bring down all that water at once?"

"I guess that ends the battle?" called Bentley, and Dolven nodded.

"We left our guns behind; if you want to finish us, you can do that. If not, I'm pulling out for the Trinturas. This washes us up in this country. Anyhow, the government is sending over troops next week to occupy Fort Kell; there's been too many complaints of what Clyde pulled there. Our horses are drowned; our camp is gone. We'll walk out when this goes down if you'll give us a little grub."

"That's that," said Bentley, "and now we'll go up and see to the gold."

Old Heck Fassett who had taken a man's part in the fight and had received a painful flesh wound in an arm, meekly led the way up a little wash, on to a bench and to a small cave hidden in a low cliff. In the back of the cave lay the mummified remains of a man, clad in the shreds of what had once been buckskin garments. An old musket lay by his side,

(Concluded on page 144)

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(Concluded from page 143)

and a brace of pistols. The old prospector or trapper had died perhaps from an injury or, possibly surrounded by Indians, he had sought to make a stand-off battle in the cave. He had been there certainly fifteen or twenty years. From his silver conchas, the shape of his hat, they guessed he had come from California.

"He had that poke of gold dust layin' beside him," muttered Heck. "There wa'n't no way o' findin' out who the gold belonged to, so I taken it. Then I got drunk at Hager Ford and begun makin' wild brags about a gold strike—but they was only brags. You gents kin hang me if you want; I figger I got it comin' anyway, for not doin' right by the Hester family after I'd been the one what got 'em to join the gold rush. But if yuh don't string me up, I'm done huntin' gold; I'll do my best to look after 'em."

Bentley spat. "Here we fought over gold that never even existed. If Heck hadn't been hurt in that fight, I'd still be in favor of stretchin' the old coot's neck."

"Yes, you fought a battle for gold that never was," admitted Grant Haylock, "but you cleared a country of a gang of scoundrels, and you were saved from losing your outfits to Clyde at Fort Kell. And on top of that I'm going to show you a new and better road to the Trinturas fields. Any of you that don't find gold over there, drift back and farm here. Plenty land; plenty room for a lot of people. My brother and I, and those four McQuaid boys and the Hesters figure we'll dig our gold in this country—at ranching and farming. We ought to do a good, honest business selling beef and corn to wagon trains that will be taking this new trail."

Thinking of Aldis Hester's bright yellow hair, Grant Haylock suddenly grinned.

"As the old saying goes," he said, "'Gold's where you find it!'"

THE END

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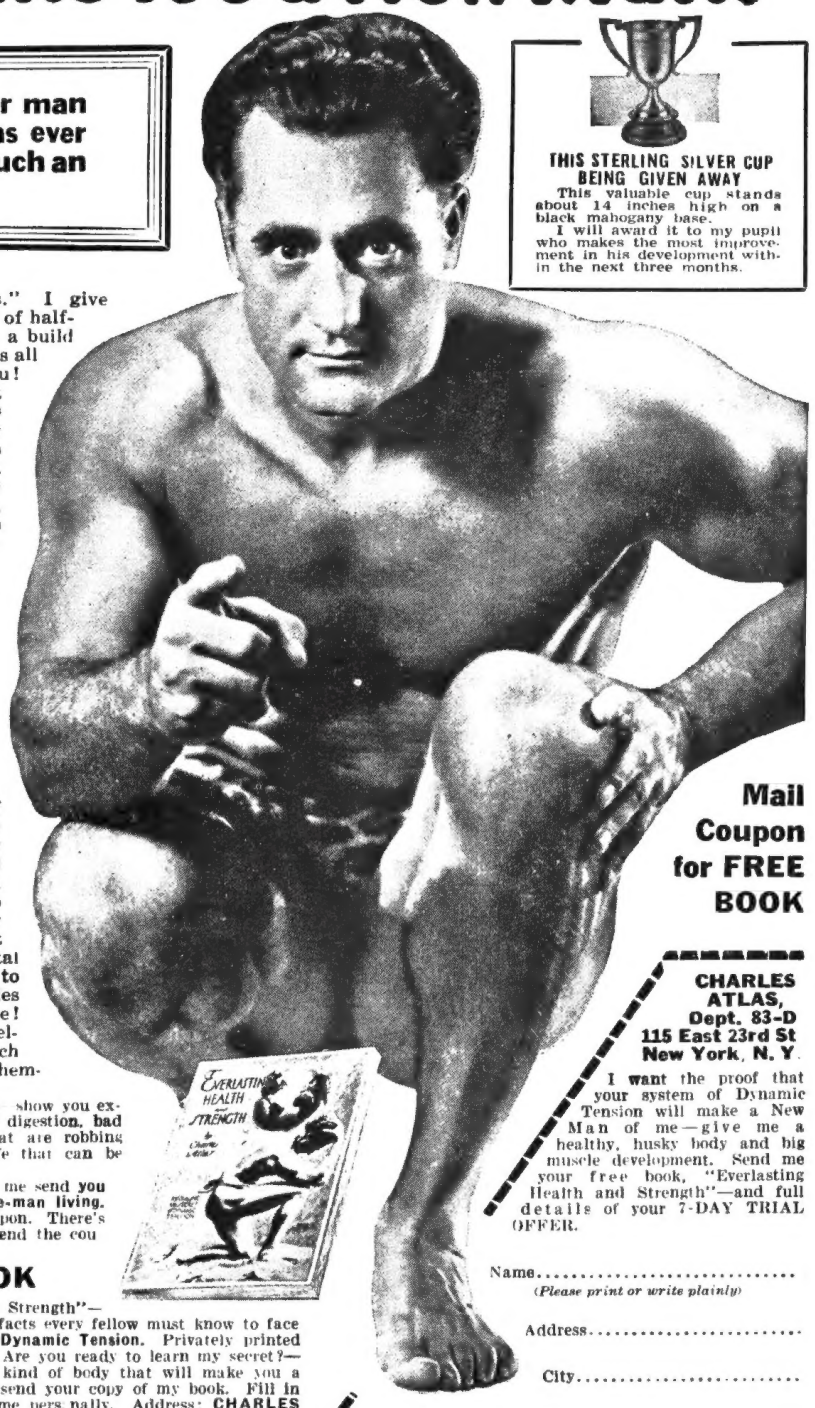

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